The Neglected Clue

Isabel Ostrander

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The Neglected Clue

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ANNIHILATION
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LIBERATION
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SUSPENSE
THE TATTOOED ARM

THE NEGLECTED CLUE . . . *by* ISABEL OSTRANDER . . . . . .

ROBERT M. McBRIDE & COMPANY
NEW YORK 1925

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Printed in the U. S. A.

Published, 1925

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Dr. Oakes Pays a Call	1
II	D'Almalli's Voice	14
III	Shadows	27
IV	On the Giant's Staircase	39
V	The Curiosity of Miss Parrish	53
VI	The Death-Stroke	65
VII	Cornelius Peterby, Deputy	78
VIII	The Steel Trunk	92
IX	Peterby Goes on a Mission	103
X	Montford Lutrelle Speaks	116
XI	Severed Wires	130
XII	The Odor of Musk	143
XIII	An Unexpected Witness	154
XIV	The Other Woman	167
XV	The Mansion House Guest	182
XVI	The Revealing Light	196
XVII	Dead Face and Living	211
XVIII	The Claimant	223
XIX	Deep Waters	236
XX	A Message from the Sheriff	249
XXI	The Locked Book	260
XXII	Peterby Makes a Find	271
XXIII	When Twilight Fell	281
XXIV	The Neglected Clue	297

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CHAPTER I

DR. OAKES PAYS A CALL

DR. OAKES closed the door of his office and went slowly down the tree-shaded path bordered with asters and dahlias to his little car waiting just beyond the gate. That one-storied wing at the side of his pleasant, old, yellow house had been for more than thirty years the Mecca for the ailing ones of Edenvale. The old steel engravings on the walls of the consulting-room had looked down on many crucial scenes when hopes of health and of life itself had hung fearfully upon his pronouncements, but on none so poignant as that of the hour just passed. The doctor shivered as he drew his mohair duster more closely about his tall, ungainly frame.

There was a touch of frost in the air and a sere leaf fluttered down and lay trembling at his feet as might a sentient, blighted thing. Autumn was on the way, the dissolution of summer impended, death was everywhere! His whole life had been spent in fighting it, a long and losing fight, ultimately, inevitably futile!

He closed the gate with a sharp click and, swinging himself up behind the wheel, rolled slowly off in the

trim little roadster, the fine lines deepening about his kindly gray eyes and his mouth set and stern. It softened only when a small boy, trundling a red cart, hailed him shyly from the walk and a woman nodded over her gate, smiling a cheery greeting. Johnny Tubbs' adenoids had given him a bad half-hour, but the little fellow's faith and confidence in him had helped a lot, and Mrs. Hazen had told him about that tumor just in time. Minor victories, perhaps, a mere staying of the relentless hand, but the thought of them lightened the shadow which the afternoon's task had laid upon him.

Lightened, but not dispelled it. The main street of the village, with its double line of frame shops and newer brick business block, its crowding produce-trucks and clanging trolleys, had been left behind, and the pleasantly shaded residential avenue which succeeded it had in turn given way to a winding country road, when a round, reddened face surmounting a stout figure appeared suddenly over the top of a hedge and a trowel waved in greeting.

Dr. Oakes brought the car to a halt.

"Hello, Cornelius! Getting the bulbs in for the winter? It's coming right enough."

The stout man pushed his cap further back on his head, revealing a round, shining bald crown beyond the fringe of still brown hair.

"Afternoon, Doc! The bulbs could blamed well freeze for all of me, but you said it was up to me to dig in the ground or lie under it, and I'm not looking for a stroke just yet. Five years those city specialists

gave me if I'd give up the stock market for golf, and I've lasted twelve out here without touching a fool ball! What are you doing out this way?"

"Old Theron Bemis got kicked by a horse yesterday, and I put two of his ribs in plaster; I'm just going up to see that the superannuated rascal hasn't knocked it loose getting up to see that the chores are done the way he likes 'em," the doctor explained. "Your grounds are looking fine since you've been taking care of them yourself. I don't care how much money you sheared from the lambs in Wall Street, you were flirting with apoplexy lying around here just bossing your gardeners for exercise!"

"Hah!" The reluctant horticulturist wiped his perspiring forehead and then waved toward the gateway in the hedge. "Come on in and tempt Providence with something I've been making in the cellar. Old Theron can wait."

The doctor shook his head.

"No, thanks, Cornelius. I've got to be getting on." His hands had fallen from the wheel, however, and he gazed out over the dusty ribbon of roadway to its vanishing point at the brow of a green-shrouded hill. "Summer's dying hard, isn't it!"

"There's a good, healthy snap in the air, though." Cornelius Peterby darted a swift, unexpectedly keen glance at his old friend and added with a change of tone: "What is it, Doc? What's wrong?"

"I was just thinking that a judge hasn't much leeway when a jury's brought in a verdict of guilty in the first degree." Doctor Oakes spoke slowly, as if to himself.

"The State says there's only one penalty for that, so all he can do is pronounce sentence; but I was wondering how he must feel about it."

"Thinking of Cruikshank?" Peterby mentioned the local *cause celébre.* "He broke in and killed the old woman for her egg-money, all right. Why in the world hayseeds won't trust to banks—!"

"No, I wasn't thinking of Cruikshank," the doctor interrupted. "Just of a hypothetical case. I guess I know how the judge would feel; I had to hand out a death sentence myself this afternoon."

"Hah!" The habitual ejaculation was fraught with commiseration. "That's mighty bad! One of your patients, you mean—no hope?"

"Not a chance in the world, and the worst of it is you wouldn't dream there was anything wrong! There isn't the slightest indication for an unprofessional eye—" He broke off, shaking his head. "It was just about the hardest thing I ever did, Cornelius, to say what I had to, and watch it taken upstanding, without a wince! I tell you, there are times when the most orthodox of us doubt the wisdom of the Creator!"

"No, we don't, not for long, anyhow." Peterby's round, ruddy face took on an added gravity. "Since you made me get down to the soil I've found myself interested in spite of myself in the grubs and worms as well as the plants; we're both naturalists in a way, Doc, and you can't get close to an understanding of the works of nature without getting closer to an understanding of the ways of the Almighty. I wonder sometimes at your psychology, though. It was arbitrary

with you to pronounce sentence in this case, was it? You couldn't have made it an indeterminate one? To go back to our theological discussion: Did you feel you had to give your patient time to put his house in order?"

"It's the most orderly house in all Edenvale, in that sense," the doctor responded. "There are some people in this world you can't fool, to whom the truth is more than merciful, a downright act of justice! That's the pity of it, and this patient of mine is one of them. I can't even grant a stay as a judge might; I can only make the way a little easier. But I needn't unleash my black dogs on you! See you at the directors' meeting at the bank tomorrow night?"

"Before that. You're dining at the Greshams' tonight, aren't you?" Peterby's liveliest curiosity had been aroused by the doctor's veiled disclosure, but he recognized that the moment of an unusual confidence was over. "Quite a little party, I believe. Mrs. Gresham told me over the 'phone that a lot of young people were coming in later for a dance, but we'd find a quiet corner for bridge. No one else is invited for dinner except Miss Parrish and of course young Jim Masters—and Mrs. Leigh. I've been wondering if it's a special occasion that I ought to have remembered, knowing them ever since I moved out from town!"

The doctor smiled slightly, for his most opulent patient had uttered the last name in a changed, fatuous tone.

"It happens to be little Rosalie's birthday; I have more reason to recall it than you, for I brought her

into the world nineteen years ago! Tempus *does* fugit, doesn't it?"

"Lord! I'll have to 'phone to town!" Peterby ran his hand over his fringe of hair. "She's a pretty thing, but wild as a young colt! Looks more every day like what her mother must have been as a girl before Gresham broke her spirit, but she acts as if—"

He paused, and Dr. Oakes replied to the unfinished comment:

"Young blood, impetuous daring of inexperience, general restlessness of the age; but nothing there that won't be fine and strong when she gets her balance, Cornelius! She hasn't inherited her father's tendencies but her mother's spirit, which is far from broken, although in Rosalie it is attuned just now to jazz. So Mrs. Leigh is dining with us all tonight! She's a magnificent woman; a little bit out of the picture here."

"'Out of the picture'?" Peterby repeated. "I should say she was! An orchid growing in a plowed field!" He waved a plump arm enthusiastically and then reddened still more. "I'm not getting poetical, Doc, but Mrs. Leigh belongs to a rarefied atmosphere, perfumed, blazing with lights, throbbing with music—not jazz, nor a country melodeon, but grand opera! Don't you feel it yourself when you're with her? Gad, if I weren't fat and nearly fifty—"

"You'd last about six months in that rarefied atmosphere you're talking about, with your arteries!" retorted the doctor. "Personally, I don't feel anything in Mrs. Leigh's presence but curiosity as to how and

why she came to buy Ivy Terrace and bury herself among us. Still, she's become quite a model Lady of the Manor, and she appears to like it. Mind you *walk* to Rose Acre tonight!"

"Two miles?" Peterby snorted. "You wouldn't let me ride to my own funeral if you could stop it! Get along to old Theron; it'd be worth a couple of broken ribs to rest for a day or two!"

The doctor started the motor, waved in farewell, and moved off down the road, but just over the brow of the hill he came upon a middle-aged lady of grim aspect sitting erectly on a stone while a harassed chauffeur tinkered in the open hood of a smart blue sedan.

"Good afternoon, Hannah." Dr. Oakes halted again. "Having a little trouble?"

"Oh, no!" the lady responded witheringly. "Henry thought he'd stop to show me how the wheels go 'round!"

The doctor laughed.

"Can I help you, Henry?"

"No, sir." The chauffeur straightened for a moment. "She's missing, but I haven't located the trouble yet."

"She'll be missing from the garage if this keeps up!" promised Miss Hannah Parrish darkly. "Henry gave me no peace till I sold the old Merrimac and bought this hulking ark, and now the only way we get home is on the end of a tow-rope!"

There was, however, a twinkle in the light eyes, set well apart above her sharp nose. Henry bent once

more over his task without comment, but the doctor opened the door of his own little car and gestured to the empty seat beside him.

"I haven't a rope with me, but if you'll get in I'll drop you off at your house, Hannah. We can 'phone for help for Henry."

Henry declined aid, feeling that his professional dignity was assailed, but his employer accepted the invitation, and as they moved on she remarked:

"I suppose you'll be at the Greshams' tonight. Upon my soul we'll have a pleasant party—did you see the 'Trumpet' last week? Jim Masters is beginning to go after Bill Gresham tooth and nail because of the conditions among his factory workers. He didn't want to do it, of course, because of Rosalie; but I showed him that he couldn't afford to dodge that issue in his campaign. Daniel, if Jim is the next mayor of Edenvale we'll see some changes that have been a long time coming!"

"And you're working hammer and tongs for it, aren't you?" Doctor Oakes smiled quizzically at her. "You've got a lot of faith in the new generation, haven't you?"

"I've got a lot of faith in Jim, and if the new generation can't produce any better mayoralty material than the last for this village we'd do well to let the township swallow us up!" Miss Parrish retorted with spirit. "Is there another community in this country with poorer lighting, worse roads, as much graft—"

"I'm voting for Jim; so you needn't waste all that eloquence on me, Hannah," the doctor interrupted

mildly. "I've listened to election promises for more than thirty years, since I cast my first ballot, but I guess Jim means his. He's a fine boy. How much are you putting into this campaign of his?"

"Never you mind!" Miss Parrish pushed a wisp of sandy hair back beneath her severe toque, not in the least embarrassed by the direct question. "I've watched Grace Master's son grow up, and he's gone far; I'm going to see him mayor this fall if I haven't enough left to pay my taxes! Bill Gresham's supporting Perce Cooley for reëlection because Perce leaves his factories alone, but they're a disgrace! He conforms to the rules of the health board and the demands of the union, but there's an older moral law that he won't recognize. Gresham Hollow is a blot on the community, but you can't expect a man who doesn't live right himself to look for decency among his employees! Jim will clean out that element like a fire hose and Bill knows it; I'm curious to see how he treats the boy tonight."

"Oh, I don't believe he'll ride him very hard! He knows how crazy Jim has always been about Rosalie," the doctor remarked easily. "He couldn't very well in his own house, but if Jim goes after him too strenuously he'll strike in some roundabout fashion, and strike hard."

"Yes—in the back!" Miss Parrish declared. "Bill would put his arm around your neck and stab you between the shoulder blades! I know that isn't a nice way to talk about a man whose bread I'm going to break this evening, but you and I went to school to-

gether, Daniel, and you know I always speak my mind!"

"I do!" he assented with a chuckle. Then his face grew gravely reminiscent. "Do you remember what a pretty girl Nellie Meadows was in those days, Hannah? She was just trotting into primary when we went to high, but she was a little beauty and the happiest, most mischievous—"

He broke off and his companion nodded.

"She was the proudest, happiest girl in the whole township when Bill Gresham's father started his plant here and Bill asked her to marry him. 'Handsome Bill,' they called him! Humph! He got in his first woman scandal before Rosalie was a year old, and Nellie told me then she'd never have another. She's put in nearly twenty years forgiving him and holding her head above the scum of one nasty mess after another. I don't know why she endures it—I don't believe in divorce, but I'd have sent him packing long ago!"

"Nellie has a different sort of pride; her little girl will never come a cropper if she marries Jim."

"*If* she does." Miss Parrish agreed but with qualifying emphasis. "I'm going to have a talk with Rosalie soon! She's running wild with that country-club set and treats Jim as if she didn't care any more—but you know the latest phase, don't you? I wonder who this is?"

"This" was a man in a glaring red roadster with massive wheels and broad bands of shining metal. He was a well-built, well-groomed young man, but with

tired lines about his eyes, although he drew up with quite an air as they approached.

"I beg pardon. Could you tell me the way to an estate around here called Ivy Terrace?" he asked. His voice was cultured and genial. "I'm a dub at directions, and I've been trailing cross-roads for an hour!"

"Next turning to your left and first place after you pass the pond," Dr. Oakes replied. "It's terraced right up from the gate and the house is yellow brick almost covered with ivy; you can't miss it."

The young man thanked him and drove on in a cloud of dust, and Miss Parrish drew in her lips.

"Humph! Going to call on Mrs. Leigh! That's the first visitor of hers I've seen, and she's been here nearly a year. Doesn't it strike you as being odd?"

"Good Lord, Hannah, I never thought about it!" the doctor exclaimed. "Why should she entertain if she doesn't want to? You women!"

"I didn't say she should!" his companion countered with some asperity. "She entertains us in return for our attempts at hospitality, but I say it's odd that she hasn't, well—anybody. One can be without relations by circumstances, but without friends only by design. She isn't as young as she looks, but she's young enough not to take to alien soil and try to like it!"

"I heard her compared to an orchid in a plowed field not so very long ago," he remarked. Then as if regretting the indiscretion he added: "Mrs. Leigh is a charming woman."

"Yes." There was a dry significance in the monosyllable. "All the men bear witness to that, even that fat idiot Peterby! Even Bill Gresham; watch him tonight."

"I'm not interested in Bill Gresham!" the doctor interposed to prevent further remark. "What were you saying about Rosalie, though, just before we met that young man in the car? You asked if I knew the latest phase—"

"Mrs. Leigh," responded Miss Parrish as he paused. "The child's simply mad about her, worshiped her from a distance ever since she came, the way a young girl will sit at the feet of a woman of the world, particularly if there is a hint of mystery about her; but lately Mrs. Leigh has been cultivating her, going out of her way to interest herself in Rosalie. Of course the girl's in the seventh heaven!"

"We-ell," he began equably, "if it's getting her away from that country-club crowd who circulate flasks between dances and light each other's cigarettes instead of holding hands—"

"I'm not so sure," she interrupted shortly. "They're young, just trying to be worldly and wicked; it's a phase that will pass. I don't mean there's anything wicked about Mrs. Leigh, but she acts like a woman who is trying mighty hard to forget something. Rosalie's memories are before her, if you know what I mean. Don't bother to drive in, I'll get out here."

They had reached the great gates of the old estate, which had come down through generations to its pres-

ent rather eccentric owner; and the doctor stopped his little car obediently to permit her to descend, then drove off on his belated call.

A talk with her was always stimulating, but today it was disquieting as well, for she had voiced the question in his own mind. What motive had led the charming Mrs. Leigh to bury herself in Edenvale?

CHAPTER II

D'ALMALLI'S VOICE

ROSE ACRE, the home of William Gresham, whose factories hung a pall of smoke over all the district south of the village, was blazing with lights and filled with the last of the flowers that gave it its name. It was the birthday of the laughing sprite of a girl who stood before Cornelius Peterby in the drawing-room, looking down at the great feather fan he had placed in her hands.

"It's adorable!" she exclaimed. "I can't thank you enough, Mr. Peterby! I've never had such a birthday as this! Father gave me stock, you know—he always does—and mother these pearls, and Mrs. Leigh this heavenly vanity case, and there were ever so many things from the crowd! Oh, here's Dr. Dan!"

She turned as the tall figure of the doctor, more ungainly than ever in his dinner clothes, appeared in the doorway; and Peterby approached the davenport on which a woman was seated in an attitude of almost queenly grace. Her long, lissome body was exquisitely molded, her features classically regular, and when she lifted her head golden lights gleamed in her soft, chestnut hair.

"I shan't try to tell you how charming you look this evening, Mrs. Leigh!" Peterby bowed until his shirt-

front protruded and his collar was buried in his lowest chin.

The deep violet eyes raised to his held no hint of amusement, however.

"Do try!" Mrs. Leigh spoke in a voice of liquid music. "I love to hear that, from some one who really thinks so! But the little birthday girl carries off the honors tonight! She is like an entrancing fairy thing, isn't she? I was just remarking to Mr. Gresham how utterly absurd it seems that he should be the father of such a grown-up young lady!"

The man who was seated at her other side frowned slightly. He was undeniably handsome, though a trifle florid, his hair as yet untouched by gray, his prominent brown eyes and cleft, rather weak, chin unmarred by any lines.

"Hah!" Peterby seated himself at Mrs. Leigh's gesture. "Rosalie is growing up, eh, Gresham? She'll be trotting off and marrying before you know it one of these days!"

His eyes followed those of his host to the young girl, who had turned from the doctor to greet a newer arrival. She was blonde and vividly pretty with round eyes of china blue and a delicate, wildrose complexion that deepened a trifle as she held out her hand to the dark, virile-looking young man in the doorway.

"Jim!" Her voice, almost childish in its clear treble, drifted across the room to the trio on the davenport. "How perfectly like you to send me books! Nobody reads poetry nowadays, of course, but the bindings are dreams!"

The young man flushed, too, but he squared his shoulders and smiled.

"As long as you don't think my choice was 'quaint,' Rosalie, I'm not abashed!" he replied in a tone of light banter that did not wholly conceal a hurt note. "That was what you said last year."

"Oh, last year! Whoever remembers what they said a year ago!" Her red lips pouted. "Let me see, what did you give me?"

"You see?" Miss Parrish, in a black-satin gown which revealed her stark angularity, was standing at one side with the doctor. "Wouldn't you think she was deliberately trying to make him miserable? I could shake her!"

"Unthinking youth, Hannah! Jim can stand it, and if it means that she doesn't care he'd better know it now than later."

"She doesn't know her own mind, and Mrs. Leigh's bewitched her!" Miss Parrish snapped. "Did you see what she gave her? A platinum vanity case, filled! Rouge and a lipstick and powder for that baby! It's abominable! I hope Nellie will have sense enough not to allow her to carry it."

"Where is Nellie? Have you seen her?" There was concern in the doctor's tone. "I hope she hasn't worn herself out preparing for the young folks' dance tonight."

His companion stared.

"I never heard her complain of being tired in her life, did you?"

"I never heard her complain of anything!" He

shrugged. "Where Rosalie's concerned nothing could be too much trouble, of course! Don't worry about the girl, Hannah; when she finds herself she'll be a great little woman and no harm could come to her with such a mother standing by! She and Jim will have to work out their own salvation. Here's Nellie now."

A little woman, pretty in a faded, colorless fashion, with frank touches of gray in her dull-gold hair, had entered murmuring soft-voiced excuses for her tardiness. When she had greeted the others she joined Miss Parrish and her companion.

"Nellie, why did you give her your first string of pearls?" the older woman demanded bluntly. "I thought you were going to keep them till she was twenty-one."

"Oh, well, a girl loves pretty things naturally, and the pearls are quite small." Ellen Gresham's eyes were suddenly luminous as she regarded her daughter. "I like to see them on her, don't you, Doctor Dan?"

"She's lovely in them," he assented gravely. "Hannah thinks that between us we're conspiring to spoil her."

"Not all of us!" Miss Parrish corrected tartly. "Nellie, did you see Mrs. Leigh's gift to her?"

"Of course. I told her it was far too wonderful for our simple little girl, but it was one that she used to carry herself and she is tired of it. Don't look so shocked, Hannah! I remember when we used to hide a bit of chamois with rice powder on it when we went to dances ourselves!" Mrs. Gresham laughed with a

clear, rippling note not unlike her daughter's, but gentler. "Shall we go in?"

During dinner the conversation was general at first, but gradually Mrs. Leigh dominated it although she made no effort to do so and expressed no views of her own. Peterby and Gresham hung openly on her words, and Rosalie scarcely took her eyes from her. To the doctor and Miss Parrish, who were watching, Mrs. Gresham's attitude was placidly gracious and amused, but Jim Masters sat moodily silent for the most part, his food untouched on his plate.

Mrs. Leigh had remarked upon the beauty of the slender vase filled with roses which formed the nucleus of the table decorations, and Rosalie observed:

"It's Florentine glass, but you must have seen ever so many prettier ones. Just think, Mrs. Leigh has lived in Italy! Not just gone there on a trip, but *lived* there! What city was it you told me about with the great opera house where all the famous singers have their first real test?"

"La Scala? At Milano—Milan," Mrs. Leigh corrected herself, pronouncing the name in English, and Miss Parrish sniffed. "It is very lovely there—too lovely. The sunshine becomes monotonous."

"It must be—glorious!" Rosalie exclaimed. "Not the weather, but the opera house! Fancy standing there before a sea of people waiting for the orchestra to play the opening notes of your aria and wondering whether you'll wake up the next morning to find yourself a prima donna with the world at your feet—"

"Or a disappointed young enthusiast with a cold in

the head!" Miss Parrish finished. "For every great singer there are a thousand who fail, Rosalie. When one thinks of all the young idiots who waste the best years of their lives in study and privation, because their friends tell them how marvelous they are, and who sink into oblivion after a single appearance, it's pitiable."

"They've had that hour, though!" Rosalie drew a deep breath. "It must be worth it all!"

"One needs more than a voice to become great, dear," Ellen Gresham said gently. "Strength of character, to avoid temptations and endure the long arduous study, perseverance and poise, and a fixed determination."

"Do you think I haven't any of these things?" The girl turned upon her mother. "Do you think I wouldn't study years, that I wouldn't work for it, *live* for it, forget everything else in this world?"

"You, child?" Mrs. Gresham's eyes opened wide and seemed to darken, but she smiled deprecatingly. "We love your voice and you will always give your friends a great deal of pleasure with it, but it isn't a prima donna's, and even if it were you haven't the temperament of an artist. Your place is here, with all of us."

"You'll see!" Rosalie spoke through set teeth and her blue eyes flashed. "That's what I mean to do—go to Italy and study! I'd *die* sticking here the rest of my life! How could any one but a—a real critic tell whether my voice was great or not, or if I had an artist's temperament? Everything is so—so *little* here,

and unimportant, and every one takes themselves so seriously, when they were never even heard of fifty miles away! It would be funny if it weren't so—insufferable! I want to know people who are worth while—famous people. I want to hear great singers, to see the opera houses packed to the doors, to feel the—the wonderful life of it all! I know you think it's horribly conceited, but if I really have a voice I owe it to myself to have my chance!"

A moment of electrified silence followed the girl's outburst, and then Cornelius Peterby ejaculated:

"Hah! I guess all of us went through that feeling at one time or another! I wanted to be an actor once —one of those dramatic, swashbuckling heroes; but you wouldn't think it to look at me now!"

That broke the tension, and after the general ripple of amusement the talk drifted into other channels; but Mrs. Gresham's colorless face was even more pallid, and Jim Masters sat as if turned to stone.

"You see?" Miss Parrish remarked for the second time that evening to her neighbor, Dr. Oakes. "You won't have to go far to find the one who put such notions into her head! They're more pernicious than anything she'd learn at the country club, and it's time somebody took her in hand. That child a prima donna? You can't even hear her back of the tenth pew!"

The doctor did not reply, but his expression was gravely troubled and he glanced from Mrs. Leigh's calmly detached face, as perfect and immobile as that

of a statue, to his hostess. Mrs. Gresham had apparently forgotten her daughter's hysterical declaration, however, for she was talking with more than her usual animation to the young mayoralty candidate, and he had roused himself to reply in kind. Dr. Oakes' easy-going spirit relaxed; it had just been a flare-up of youthful impetuosity, that was all, but Hannah was right—it was time some one took Rosalie in hand.

"Yes, I'm going to enlarge," William Gresham was saying in response to a remark of Peterby's, and it seemed to the doctor that he cast a defiant look, almost of challenge, down the table to Jim Masters. "The post-bellum depression is over, and I get more orders than I can fill with my present facilities. There are mud-slingers after every big enterprise, a lot of old women who talk as if a manufacturing plant ought to be a camp-meeting. I'd rather give an employee of mine a plug of tobacco than a tract any day; and I'm not his keeper, to bother with what he does after the whistles blow! They've got ample housing, convenient stores, schools for the kids; and the Compensation Act gives them full damages for any injuries. In turn I've got the most contented lot of workers in the State—and why? Because I mind my own business and let them mind theirs!"

"Shall we go into the music-room?" Mrs. Gresham rose and laid her fingertips lightly for an instant on Jim Masters' sleeve. "The other young people won't begin to arrive just yet, and Rosalie has some new records that we should hear."

She led the way and the others followed into the spacious, high-ceilinged room with the raised platform at one end. The rest of the space had been cleared for dancing, and the long French windows opening on the unroofed balcony that hung over the rose garden stood invitingly wide, with the last fragrance of the season's dying blooms filling the air.

Mrs. Leigh moved with her slightly swaying, undulating step over to one of the windows, and Peterby and Gresham both started after; but Miss Parrish forestalled them. With a look of grim resolve she stalked in front of them, and when Mrs. Leigh turned she found the gaunt spinster at her elbow.

"Oh," she smiled, recovering herself. "It's a beautiful night, isn't it, Miss Parrish? The moonlight is fascinating! I never tire of this peaceful, rolling countryside with the winding roads—"

Miss Parrish's lips were drawn back in a tight-lipped smile as if she were swallowing something hard.

"These winding roads may be picturesque, but they're bad going," she remarked. "Your friend got lost today."

"My—friend?" Mrs. Leigh's perfect eyebrows rose slightly.

"The young man in the red car," the other explained. "The doctor had to direct him to your house."

"A young man in a red car?" repeated Mrs. Leigh. "I had no caller today!"

Her voice expressed only polite wonder, and Miss Parrish made a gesture of impatience.

"He stopped us and asked the way to Ivy Terrace,"

she insisted. "Dr. Oakes told him, describing the house, and he drove off in your direction."

"Oh, of course! Perseus told me that someone had been there inquiring for the Ramsays." Mrs. Leigh shrugged. "I'd forgotten all about it, but I did think it odd; for it's more than a year since I bought the property from them, you know. Perseus did say something about a car, I think, but I paid little attention. Why—what—!"

She was standing in shadow just beyond the threshold, and now she turned swiftly as up on the platform Rosalie started the phonograph and soft violins wailed out in a haunting, exquisite refrain. Then a woman's voice, high and clear, poured gloriously forth and silence fell alike on Mrs. Gresham and the doctor, who were talking together, and on Gresham himself and Peterby, halted midway to the window.

The doctor glanced curiously at the two women standing just outside on the balcony, and then his attention became fixed. Miss Parrish was listening with a softer expression than he had ever seen on her sharp features, and Mrs. Leigh leaned against the side of the window with bent head, as if overcome by the music's emotional appeal. He could see her deep breast rise and fall in the tumultuous heaving of her breath.

The voice died away in a last high, golden note, the violins sobbed into silence, and a little stir ran among them as if they were awakened from a dream.

"Hah! God bless my soul, what a heavenly voice!" Cornelius Peterby exclaimed.

"Who was it, dear?" Mrs. Graham called softly up to her daughter, but it was Jim Masters who replied from the platform.

"Somebody named 'd'Almalli'; I never heard of her, but it was great, wasn't it?"

Rosalie closed the doors of the phonograph and came slowly down to the others.

"D'Almalli was one of the failures Miss Parrish spoke of," she said coldly. "The man where I bought the records told me about her."

"'Failure!' With that voice!" Peterby waved his plump, short arms unable to express himself further.

"She would have been the most famous lyric soprano in the world, the man said, but she studied too hard or something," Rosalie went on. "Anyway, after her début in Italy she was acclaimed everywhere. She made a few of these records and then sang at the opening of the opera season in Paris. It was a triumph, but the next morning her voice was gone!"

Miss Parrish turned abruptly and came toward her, while Gresham, seizing his opportunity, strolled to the window and stepped through.

"Do you mean she was dumb?" demanded Miss Parrish incredulously.

"As far as singing goes. It was just a queer, husky, creaking breath, and though her speaking voice grew clear again she never could sustain a note; it always broke horribly!"

"How very sad!" Mrs. Gresham said softly. "To possess such a glorious gift and then have it taken away—surely it were better never to have known it!"

"Never to have had that—that you heard just now?" Rosalie cried. "I'd be willing to *die* if I could sing like that, only once!"

Out on the balcony William Gresham was delicately adjusting a light wrap about the shoulders of his guest.

"These autumn nights are deceptive," he remarked in a tone which his wife had not heard in long years. "They seem as warm as summer, but a chill comes quickly and one cannot be too careful! Your hands are cold!"

"No." She drew them slowly from his with a long look from her violet eyes. "Life is like that, isn't it? Deceptively warm and pleasant and then the chill!"

"Has it been like that to you, too?" He led her to a vine-shrouded bench where they could look down over the rose garden bathed in moonlight. "To a woman so beautiful life should only have been kind. I cannot imagine you in anything but the glory of midsummer, Mrs. Leigh!"

"What a very charming speech!" She touched his knee lightly with her slim fingers. "The chill comes to all of us, though, my friend. I suppose a man isn't so susceptible, so sensitive?"

"A man's life is largely of his own making, and if he has made an early mistake he must suffer the consequences in silence." Gresham sighed. "I wonder how many men, if they had their lives to live over again, would take the same big turnings! A boy's impetuous impulse, then disillusionment as to his own feelings, I mean, and after that a lifetime of loneliness, of groping attempts to fill the void with lesser, trifling things!"

"Poor boy!" It was the merest whisper, but Gresham's eager ears caught it, and he said huskily:

"That was just loneliness, the knowledge that something was missing that other men had, but then to have it come to one! To realize what it was that would have meant everything—too late!" He paused and suddenly caught her in his arms, adding: "To hold it for a moment as I am holding you, and then to have to let it slip from one's grasp!"

As his quick rush of impassioned words ceased, there came a slight stir behind them, as if the leaves of the climbing vine rustled in the night breeze, and Mrs. Leigh drew herself away, but lingeringly, and rose.

"I—I think we must both be a little mad!" she exclaimed in a low thrilling tone. "We must blame the moonlight, my friend, and then forget! I shall make my excuses inside and slip away home now; the chatter of young people, dancing, bridge—it would all be too utterly banal to endure after! I must be alone!"

"Even that is denied me!" Gresham had risen also, and, tall as she was, he had to bend his head to look into her eyes. "I must put on my mask again, play a part! Blame this moment on the moonlight if you please, but don't forget it too quickly! That is all I can ask of you, my—my dear!"

CHAPTER III

SHADOWS

WHEN they reëntered the music-room the little group had resolved itself into three couples, Mrs. Gresham and Peterby placidly discussing horticulture, Hannah Parrish and the young candidate for mayor holding an animated discussion by the empty fireplace, and Rosalie listening with bent head and pouting lips to the doctor's low-placed tones.

"Mrs. Gresham—dear Rosalie—you won't mind if I run away?" Mrs. Leigh advanced with both hands outstretched in a prettily appealing way. "I had a slight headache before I came, and it has grown worse; I thought the air on the balcony might relieve it, but it hasn't and I find I really must go home and rest."

"Oh!" Rosalie exclaimed. "It will spoil my party to have you go!"

"Foolish child!" Mrs. Leigh smiled, and then lifted her hand to her forehead. "You will never miss me—there come the first of your guests for the dance."

A car with its horn sounding joyous blasts was coming up the drive, and an answering honk from the road showed that another was not far behind. Under cover of the hubbub outside Mrs. Leigh made her adieux.

"I'll see you home, Mrs. Leigh," Gresham announced formally but with a note of decision.

"Indeed you will not!" she retorted. "How absurd when I live right next door! I have only to cross the lawn and go through that little gate in the hedge —so friendly of you to have left it there when I, a stranger, came!"

There was something in her tone which deterred him from repeating his offer, and he contented himself with a meaningly reproachful glance; but Peterby approached with a smile.

"I have no duties to Miss Rosalie's arriving guests, for Dr. Oakes has absolved me from dancing," he observed. "You won't deny me the pleasure of crossing the lawn with you?"

"We-ell, just to the hedge!" Mrs. Leigh laughed in a deliciously rippling arpeggio, and the doctor, who had been quietly regarding her, nodded as if in confirmation of some unspoken thought. "You'll forgive me for taking one of your guests from you for a few minutes, Mrs. Gresham? I promise he will be back when the bridge table is arranged."

Mrs. Gresham inclined her head.

"I will fill in for him until he returns," she said. "I'm only sorry that you must go."

The tall willowy figure with the shorter rotund one trotting beside it descended the steps which led into the rose garden, and Peterby lifted his face ecstatically to the sky.

"Wonderful night!" he exclaimed with manifest enthusiasm. "Don't know when I've seen so many stars! If your head didn't ache, Mrs. Leigh, I should try to tempt you not to go in just yet!"

Her musical laugh rang out softly once more.

"I'm sure my head *would* ache if I had to listen to hours of mechanical jazz and the general hilarity of that healthy young horde!" she responded. "Was it very wicked of me?"

"Very delightful—and I am very fortunate!" Peterby paused to pluck the single rose which remained on a bush beside the path and offered it to his companion. "Positively the last of the year!"

She took it, but as her fingers closed about the stem the soft pink petals fell in a shower to her feet.

"Oh, it was dying!" A little shiver vibrated in her tones. "Poor thing, it might have lasted another day —but what is a day more or less to a rose? I am morbid tonight."

"That song, perhaps; I saw how it affected you," Peterby suggested sympathetically. "You had heard it before?"

"Many times."

"What a voice!" He tucked his hand under her rounded elbow as they left the path and struck off across the lawn toward the little white gate in the hedge. "I don't think I ever heard anything to equal it, and it's uncanny when you realize that it is gone forever."

"More than one young singer has had that experience." Mrs. Leigh's tone was indifferent, almost consciously cold. "I have heard it sung far more effectively by Maria Tarquino."

"I'm not musical myself," Peterby announced modestly. "I never could keep time to anything but a

stock ticker, yet I thought that voice tonight was wonderful, even reproduced! So you've lived in Italy! You are a very marvelous person, do you know, Mrs. Leigh?"

"I wasn't aware of it!" The breeze blew a tiny strand of her gold-brown hair across his forehead and Peterby looked up to find her great eyes fixed on him. "I am curious, Mr. Peterby; why am I marvelous?"

"Because you are contented with this quiet life and prosy neighbors after all you have had!" he replied. "Upon my soul, I can't understand it! A woman young, beautiful, with the fullness of life before her to hide away here—"

"Why do you say I am hiding?" There was a little catch in her breath, and she paused in the moonlight. "Must one be old and worn or a—a clod to prefer the peace of the country to the rush and turmoil of a city or the inconveniences of travel?"

"N-no, of course not." Peterby ran his finger around inside his collar as if it had suddenly grown too tight for him. "I'm not exactly worn out or—hah!—aged, and I don't consider myself a clod, but this life suits me. It's different with you—you belong to the world! You won't laugh if I tell you something?"

"Laugh? Why should I?" She had started to walk on again slowly to the gate, and he kept pace with her.

"Oh, well," he stammered, "I'm such a dub, you know! But today some one spoke of you, and I said you reminded me of an orchid."

"Some orchids are poisonous, aren't they?" She smiled down at him. "There isn't anything different about me, really. I lived in the country as a girl, and I always loved it. Later changes came, and I traveled a great deal; but when it became no longer of any importance where I lived my old longing for the country came back, and I was able to indulge it. You see, it's quite simple."

Peterby made no immediate reply. Why had she chosen such a strange phrase, that it had become no longer of any importance where she lived? If her husband was dead why didn't she say so, and why had she caught him up so breathlessly when he spoke of her hiding herself away? Confound it, was there some mystery about her, after all?

They had reached the gate and Mrs. Leigh had turned to hold out her hand to him, when she paused, tense and rigid, her eyes going swiftly past him and widening in a fixed stare. Involuntarily he wheeled, and it seemed to him that among the shadows thrown by the high hedge a darker shadow moved; but the breeze was waving the branches of the tall trees all about them, their silhouettes sweeping the moonlit lawn, and Peterby could not be sure.

"Did you think some one was there?" he asked in a quick undertone. "I don't think it was anything, but I'll look, if you like."

He took a step or two, but she caught his arm, her fingers tightening like slender steel bands.

"It was nothing!" Her voice was steady but hushed. "Shall we go through?"

There was no thought now of his leaving her at the gate, and closing it after them they walked along the grassy ridge of the terrace to the steps leading to the higher one. Mrs. Leigh had not taken her hand from his arm nor loosened its convulsive grasp, and her face in the eerie light seemed to have taken on a ghastly, greenish tinge.

"You know if any one had been there it wouldn't have been so remarkable." Peterby sought to reassure her, amazed at her agitation. She was so perfectly poised always that he could not have imagined her nervous or timidly agitated. "Your gardener or butler might have been strolling about to catch a glimpse of the party going on next door."

"Either of them would have spoken!" She caught herself up and added hastily, "It was just nerves, I suppose. Silly of me to give way to them, but I have never liked—shadows."

"You have none here except the straight lines cast by the shelving tiers of the terrace!" remarked Peterby soothingly. "Straight from the gate up to your portico it is like a giant staircase of green velvet, isn't it? I never noticed it so plainly before. There must have been a steep natural hill here when Ramsay's grandfather built his home on the very top."

He had talked on to give her time to recover herself as they mounted the steps to the highest level, which had been railed in and floored with concrete. Stone benches and flower pedestals stood about, and a small fountain jetted a sparkling mist into the luminous air.

"It is a wonderful night, isn't it?" Mrs. Leigh

paused. "If I were not keeping you from your bridge—"

"I was wondering if I couldn't persuade you to stay out just a little longer," Peterby said eagerly. "I wouldn't suggest it, but you've confessed that your headache was a myth."

"Let us sit here then." She laughed once more but her tones were throaty and tremulous. "You may smoke, you know, if you like. There, Rosalie's dance has commenced!"

From beyond the trees over the hedge there came the distant clash and blare of a jazz record, and Mrs. Leigh had turned her head toward it; but as he seated himself beside her Peterby saw that she was looking not at the chimneys of Rose Acre but down at the little white gate through which they had passed and with an oddly intent gaze.

Surely she could not be still apprehensive of an intruder? Thieves and tramps were almost unknown in Edenvale, and with three servants in the house and two in the chauffeur's quarters over the garage she had nothing to fear. But she was a woman and alone.

Peterby's chest swelled beneath his bulging shirt-front, and he smiled tenderly at the small pink ear just visible beneath the coils of her hair.

"Rosalie's dance—hah!—yes. The child lives for excitement of one sort or another. Dr. Oakes says it's just the restlessness of the age, but it seems to me she's getting a trifle beyond her mother. This crazy notion of flying off to Europe—"

"Why shouldn't she crave excitement, change, a

broader life than she will ever know here?" Mrs. Leigh turned to him at last. "It's human nature, Mr. Peterby, and she's young."

"You are not much more than a girl yourself, and yet you are contented here. It must be lonely for you sometimes though, isn't it?" His tone had sunk in confidential sympathy. "Don't let's talk about Rosalie; let's talk about you, Mrs. Leigh! You are much more interesting. I've thought of you so much—in fact I haven't been able to think of very many other things since I met you. There's something compelling about you, without your being in the least conscious of it; no other woman exists in your presence! Gresham feels it, the doctor, even young Masters—"

"Mr. Masters doesn't like me," she interrupted, sighing. "One can always tell. I fancy he thinks I am a dangerous influence for Rosalie—dangerous to his own interests, I mean. Did you see his face tonight? I believe he would almost have killed me if he could. I don't think he is the sort of young man to let anything stand in the way of his hopes and plans, but truly I haven't tried to make the child discontented. I am sure he would make a model husband."

There was a note of dry distaste in her tone, and Peterby chuckled.

"Not a very interesting type, eh? But I thought we weren't going to talk of Rosalie or Masters. He may not wholly approve of Rosalie knowing too much of the fashionable world he'll never take her into, but he can't blame you for her outburst tonight, and in spite of himself he couldn't help admiring you. Yet

admiration must have been showered on you always, and it isn't enough, dear lady. You are alone, you need protection, understanding, sympathy, companionship. In short a—a friend."

He hedged on the last word, and his companion moved her hand ever so slightly toward his.

"Dear man!" she breathed softly. "How did you know?"

Peterby swallowed convulsively and his plump fingers closed over hers.

"Ah, Mrs. Leigh—Alma!—if I could be that friend! I am perhaps more a part of your world than the others here. I can feel, understand. I had thought myself past the age of romance until you came, but now—" He broke off, then leaned very close to her. "You should not be alone, nor I. Let us try out our friendship; and then if perhaps you could think of me as something more, some one who could offer you a man's mature devotion—"

Mrs. Leigh looked down at her feet, but she did not reply; and as the silence lengthened Cornelius Peterby's embarrassment grew. Would she never speak? Her hand still lay in his, but limply, and it seemed to him that he could feel it chill, as if the blood were ebbing from it. Then she withdrew it swiftly.

"Mr. Peterby, I—you—your friendship—yes, gladly, I—I need friends." She was stammering incoherently, almost wildly, and the toe of her small satin slipper moved, scraping over the concrete floor. Peterby's eyes followed it as she went on: "I am flat-

tered, touched by your interest in me, but I never dreamed—I have never considered—"

What was that small gleaming object that her foot in its apparently aimless movement was gradually approaching? She had seen it when she looked down, and that was why she hadn't replied. She hadn't even been listening to him, nor aware that he was holding her hand; and Peterby's very ears tingled with indignation and affront.

Stooping, he deliberately picked up the small object and handed it to her. It was a waistcoat button of platinum and mother-of-pearl with a small sparkling green stone in the center.

"You dropped this little button—from the rosette on your slipper, perhaps," he said coldly. "I am glad that you will accept my friendship. I suppose I was a fool to have thought of anything else."

Mrs. Leigh had wrapped the button carelessly in her handkerchief, and now she held out both hands to him as she rose.

"A very kind, big-hearted 'fool,' Mr. Peterby! I—I only meant that I must have time to think! You will go now, and come to me soon? I don't know—I can't say anything more now except that I—I am very proud to be your friend."

"I understand!" So she had been listening after all! Mollified, he kissed her hand. "You will be at home tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow at four. Goodnight—my friend."

Peterby went down the steps to the terrace on a level with the little gate and then turned. She stood

there at the rail, her tall figure regal in the moonlight, her hair shimmering like an aura of mist.

What a woman! Peterby waved gallantly in response to the slender, white arm she had raised high in farewell and stumbled as he turned once more toward the gate. What a glorious creature! Her hand as it lay in his, that wisp of perfumed hair that had blown across his forehead—Gad, he'd never known anything like it!

Blindly he fumbled for the latch of the gate and pushed it open. What if he was forty-odd and fat, and she didn't need his money? He had appealed to her somehow, bless her, or she wouldn't have listened to him. How beautiful—

Something that was not the breeze rustled in the hedge, and a whiff of heavy cloying scent like musk came unpleasantly to his nostrils. So there was some one lurking about after all.

Peterby stood with his short, plump legs firmly set and demanded:

"Come out of there! What are you hanging around for anyway? Who are you?"

The rustling had ceased and no reply came, but that odor lingered and he started forward determinedly. Then there came a snapping of twigs and a swish of branches as the stout hedge seemed to part for a minute, but it closed again before he reached it and he was too stout to follow.

Should he go back through the gate and chase the intruder? It might alarm Alma Leigh, but should she not be warned? Yet she was safe enough with all

her servants, and the creature probably meant no harm. He was undoubtedly a foreigner, from that barber-shop redolence he carried around with him, and he had perhaps been attracted by the lights and music from Rose Acre.

Yet why should Alma Leigh be warned? Why was she in a position to need such warning? There was some mystery about her, after all, and with this knowledge the enchantment of her presence paled, her personal magnetism ceased to be so potent a lure. Good Lord, what had he been thinking of? The moonlight, that was what had done it, and at his age! Moonlight and a pretty woman! He was an infatuated old fool, acting like a lovesick lout, and he had almost made himself a laughingstock!

Shaking his head, Peterby turned again and started for the house, but half-way across the lawn he looked back. Through the trees the banked terraces rose above and beyond the hedge, but no living thing moved upon them, and only the trees whispered in the silence.

CHAPTER IV

ON THE GIANT'S STAIRCASE

A PLAINTIVE waltz pulsed out on the air from the open windows of the music-room as Peterby came through the rose garden, but the grating crunch of gravel punctuated it and a tall figure loomed in the path before him, scuffing the loose stones about in obvious bad humor.

"Hello, Masters! What's the matter?" he asked. "Why aren't you dancing?"

"Dancing? The devil with it!" Jim Masters turned a rueful countenance to him. "I asked Rosalie to meet me out here—gave her till the end of this waltz, and do you see her coming? Peterby, I'm all broken up! Tonight was the finish, and if it weren't for the election I'd chuck the whole thing and beat it! I'm through!"

"Tommyrot!" Peterby clapped his shoulder. "Look here, boy, I know what it is, but don't take it too seriously. Rosalie'll come out of it—girls are like that. She wants the earth, naturally, and the—the things she's sure of she doesn't appreciate. Cutting up at the country club, getting a new notion that she's going to set the world on fire with her voice, wanting all the thrills there are—that's just like measles and second teeth; she's got to go through it. There's no other fellow, you know that."

"If there were, I'd have a chance to win out, but it's worse," groaned the young man. "I've seen it coming, but I couldn't do anything to stop it. Ever since she's known that woman over there she's been changing, drinking in her silly, cynical talk, watching without seeing the play she makes for every man, steaming herself up with false ridiculous ambitions till she's come to look on everything familiar and stable and enduring as worthless. It's all that woman's doing! She's poisoned her mind, and I wish to God she had never come here!"

"Masters, you are doing Mrs. Leigh a grave injustice," Peterby asserted with dignity. "She isn't silly nor cynical; you don't understand her, that's all. If you mean Gresham, the play is being made by him; but she's so far above that sort of thing that she isn't even aware of it. Rosalie's an unsophisticated child, and of course she admires poise and elegance. She hasn't changed or turned against you—you're always underfoot, and she takes you for granted."

"She doesn't want me!" Masters set his teeth. "You can defend that woman; you're as bad as the rest of them, but I tell you she's a pernicious influence! She is amusing herself by taking Rosalie and molding her like wax in her hands; but if she spoils her, fills her head with impossible ideas so that she'll never be happy and contented again, I'll reckon with her! There! The waltz is ended, and Rosalie hasn't come! I'm going."

"Where, Masters? Don't be an ass!" Peterby grasped his arm. "You're acting like a lovesick cub,

not a man who's fit to be mayor of this town. Pull yourself together and go in and dance with some other girl, flirt with her, let Rosalie see you aren't so easy. Good Lord, have I got to teach you tricks I'd forgotten? You make me sick!"

"Let me go, Peterby." The young man's tone was ominously calm. "This isn't just a quarrel, it's the end of everything I'd hoped for and planned, and the beginning for Rosalie of a life that's going to bring her only misery and bitter disappointment. She's going to do it, what she said tonight; she can twist her father around her finger. She'll go abroad to try to be a singer, and you know how much she's fitted for it. It isn't only that I'll lose her, but she'll lose herself! She's impulsive, reckless, absurdly susceptible to flattery—think of the dangers before her! That woman is the cause of it, and I could trample her under my feet!"

He flung off Peterby's detaining hand and strode to where his small car stood at the head of the line in the drive, and Peterby shrugged. Jim Masters was only twenty-seven and he was hard hit, for Rosalie was the only girl he'd ever noticed, but he had no right to malign Mrs. Leigh even if he couldn't be expected to understand and appreciate her. His opinion would change when a certain announcement was made—but then, there was that waistcoat button on the terrace that she had tried almost slyly to conceal! She had been surprised to see it there, but she'd recognized it and—hadn't she gotten rid of him as quickly as she could, without actually committing herself?

Peterby paused on the steps leading up to the balcony, then chuckled and went on. After all, that button mightn't have been from a man's dress waistcoat but just some feminine ornament he hadn't noticed; was he making an ass of himself like Jim Masters, letting jealousy burn him up at his age?

He took his place at the bridge-table with Miss Parrish, Gresham, and the doctor, while Mrs. Gresham saw to the entertainment of her younger guests; but the last rubber was ended long before these tired of dancing, and Peterby drove the doctor home.

In the glow of the dashlight the doctor looked worn and weary, as if he had come from a long hard case, and he said little; but Peterby's spirits were high, and he did not heed his companion's abstraction. It was only when they drew near his own gate that the doctor roused himself.

"Have an interesting talk with Mrs. Leigh, Cornelius? You were long enough seeing her to her door."

"Very interesting!" Peterby replied with emphasis. "People don't understand her here. Because she chooses to keep her affairs to herself they make a mystery of it, but that's all nonsense! She explained to me why she likes it here. It's all perfectly simple. I find her most congenial."

"So I gathered." There was a dry note in the doctor's tones. "I made a curious discovery tonight. Tell you about it some time, perhaps. Mrs. Leigh has my sympathy. Goodnight, and thanks for the lift."

He climbed down, but Peterby stopped him.

"Tell me now, Doc? What's the discovery? Something about Mrs. Leigh, you mean? Is that why she has your sympathy?"

"No; I shouldn't have mentioned it, but I'm surprised it didn't strike you, too. It isn't any of our business, and we're a couple of old he-gossips! See you tomorrow night at that meeting."

Peterby drove slowly home, wondering why on earth the doctor was sorry for Mrs. Leigh. What would he say if she actually consented to—well to move down from Ivy Terrace to the stucco bungalow which could so easily be enlarged, with the wide porches and fancy pergolas and things that women liked? He'd better get after it before the frost set in. . . .

In the morning he rose at an unusually early hour, went at his exercises with grim determination, and lifted his voice in a buoyant if uncertain barytone while his tub filled. He would go to town to see about having that bald spot treated; but not today; he'd work some more fat off in the garden, and that afternoon at four he would present himself at Ivy Terrace.

Washing his butterless toast down with unsweetened coffee, he armed himself with a trowel and an empty bushel-basket and went out into the garden, which was still dripping with dew. The bulbs in the last row, down next the hedge beside the road where he had talked to Dr. Oakes the day before, still remained to be taken up, and he whistled exuberantly as he made his way between the rows of asters and budding chrysanthemums.

As he reached the hedge his whistling stopped ab-

ruptly and he paused to listen, for a car was coming along the road at a terrific rate, a light car, too, for he could hear it bumping and bouncing although it had not yet appeared. Then it careened wildly around the turn, and he beheld the doctor bent grimly over the wheel.

"Hi!" Peterby yelled. "Who's sick?"

Dr. Oakes did not reply. It was doubtful if he heard above the uproar of his outraged motor, and the next instant he had vanished in a cloud of dust.

Peterby leaned his elbows on the stout hedge and stared down the road. Only a case of life and death could make the doctor drive like that. To which of their neighbors had sudden trouble come?

He was still wondering when a small boy pedaled desperately past on a rickety bicycle and called to him in a shrill excited voice, but he couldn't make out the words. There was a railroad crossing a quarter of a mile away—had there been an accident?

While he was making up his mind as to the advisability of getting out the car and going to see, the sound of galloping hoofs and a clash of tins came to his ears, and hurrying out of the gateway he stood waving his arms as the milk-wagon clattered around the turn and bore down upon him.

"Hey, Steve! Wait a minute! What's the trouble!"

Steve drew the horse up on its haunches and leaned out, his eyes protruding and his long face pale beneath the freckles.

"Ain't you heard, Mr. Peterby? Gosh, it's awful! Mis' Leigh's dead!"

The world rocked beneath Cornelius Peterby, and a crevice yawned into which he felt himself slipping, but although it seemed to come from miles away Steve's voice still reached him.

"Fell down the terrace, she did, and broke her neck, but there's some that say it was murder!"

"Murder!" Peterby croaked. "Who—who told you, Steve?"

"C'nstable. I was leavin' a quart loose in Mis' Isley's pitcher on the stoop an' Matt came tearin' out, hitchin' his suspenders. He said maybe it was murder, and with the sheriff gone over to the county-seat—"

He paused to draw breath and Peterby sputtered:

"You couldn't have got it straight, Steve! Perhaps —perhaps Matt made the mistake! It couldn't be Mrs. Leigh!"

"Yes, 'tis, too! Mr. Gresham telephoned down for him; the gardener'd come over to him with the news. I'm goin' to get on up there quick's this old girl can travel! Want to come along with me?"

Dazed and shaken to the depths of his being, Peterby managed to squeeze himself into the seat beside Steve, and the wagon rattled off down the road. The familiar landscape had darkened and blurred, as if he beheld it through faulty smoked glasses, and there seemed a cold empty void inside him in which his heart throbbed with slow sickening beats.

Mrs. Leigh—dead! That superb figure that he had last seen poised on the terrace with white arm upraised in the moonlight, those eyes, that voice like liquid silver—dead!

"My God!" he groaned involuntarily. "My God!"

"Turr'ble, ain't it?" Steve had heard him above the pounding of the 'old girl's' ill-shod feet and the clang of the huge cans. "Nothin' like that never happened 'round here before; but that terrace's awful steep an' there's nothin' to catch onto. Once you get a good start you'd roll clear to the bottom afore you could stop yourself! She must have fell over the railin' likely, to break her neck!"

"Dr. Oakes just went by." Peterby strove to gather his shattered wits together. "Perhaps Mrs. Leigh is just badly hurt, but not—not dead! She must have been up very early—"

"No, she wasn't, neither! It happened in the night some time. Matt said Mr. Gresham told him that colored waitin' man she's got, Perseus, seen her layin' there when he come out to sweep off the top terrace, and he hollored for the gardener. That must have been 'bout six, for it's only a little after seven now. He says Mr. Gresham ran over an' seen her himself afore he 'phoned for the doc, an' he done that 'cause Doc's the cor'ner, you know."

Coroner! Peterby shuddered, and lifted a trembling hand to wipe from his forehead the cold sweat that had started there in spite of the nip in the air. The old mare's sides were heaving like bellows, and lather was gathering on the traces; but it seemed as if they

would never get there. It wasn't true, of course; it couldn't be, but he must know!

All at once a series of reports like a volley of musketry came from behind, and something shot by them with an ear-splitting roar, veiling them in a curtain of dust.

"There goes Sam Jellicoe that gets the news for the 'Trumpet,'" Steve shouted to his companion. "He only got that motorcycle last week. Look at all the folks that's got here a'ready!"

Ahead of them, down the road, a cluster of vehicles of every description blocked the way, but they had reached their destination. Past Rose Acre, with the tangled garden and widespread lawn where he had walked with her only last night, past the hedge with its little white gate, and abreast of the terrace which rose tier upon tier to the vine-clad house.

Here Steve drew up once more and Peterby clambered down, his knees giving way with every step, and stumbled toward the concrete stairway. Some one hailed him, and a woman's white shocked face that seemed somehow familiar came within his line of vision, but he did not heed them. His eyes were fixed on a knot of people gathered on one of the ledges half-way up the steep green embankment which last night he had likened to a giant's staircase. They were crowding each other, bending over something that lay on the ground. . . .

Peterby reeled, and his slow heart began to beat like a trip-hammer, half smothering him. He could feel the blood tingling in his ears, swelling the veins

on his temples, clogging his brain; but he clung to the broad rail and pulled himself up doggedly till he reached the level of the terrace on which the group were standing. Climbing over, he started toward them, when another voice called to him, authoritatively this time.

"Hey, get back there! Got to clear this terrace and there ain't anybody allowed—Oh, it's you, Mr. Peterby!" It was Constable Matt Isley, visibly inflated with importance, but his tone changed on recognizing the wealthy city man who was Doc Oakes' friend. "Reckon we'll let you see, but it's a mighty bad business, and we don't want folks cluttering up the ground more than it is."

Peterby nodded, but he had scarcely heard. He squeezed past the constable's stocky body and tottered to the group, which parted to let him through, their comments also falling on dulled ears.

Dr. Oakes was kneeling on the ground, bending over a form which lay inert, with head hanging back over the edge of the terrace step and face upturned staring at the sky. Peterby saw the soft, half-open eyes dull and glassy, the gleam of small white teeth between the sagging lips, the sheer of gold-brown hair rippling down to the level of the terrace below; and a wave of horror swept over him. Then his eyes traveled upward—for the body was lying head foremost—to the white shoulders, smudged with a grass-stain, and the bodice of the lace evening-gown. That was stained, too, but not from the ground upon which she had fallen or had been flung upon.

On that full, swelling breast, just over the heart, was a blotch of reddish brown from which two thin streams had flowed, congealing now like long streaks of thick, dull paint; and, as the significance of it penetrated to Peterby's shocked consciousness he lurched, and he would have fallen forward had not a heavy arm been flung across his back beneath his shoulders.

"Brace up, Peterby! It's a horrible thing. Knocked me over myself at first; but we've all got to face it!" Bill Gresham's voice sounded in his ears, and Dr. Oakes looked up.

"You here, Cornelius? You shouldn't have come! Get him away, Gresham, over to your house; I'll be there presently." He bent again to his gruesome task, and Gresham drew Peterby aside.

"Here, take a pull at this; you look as if you needed it! Now, come on, we can't do any good here, and we're only in the way."

Peterby choked down a swallow or two from the flask offered him and then stumbled along beside Gresham as if in a trance to the gate in the hedge. The raw liquor shot fire through his veins, but his heart was less labored and a weight seemed lifted from his chest, so that he could breathe once more.

As they passed through and the gate clicked behind them a sudden memory came of that strange rustling in the hedge on the previous night, and the odor of musk-like scent; and he opened his lips to speak, but closed them again. He mustn't tell Gresham nor any one, until he had had a chance to talk it over with the doctor.

"How—how did it happen?" he managed to gasp. "What—was the first you knew of it?"

"Gibbie the housemaid came pounding on my door and woke me up," Gresham responded. "She said Lon Corwin the gardener from next door had run over to tell me there was trouble there. I started to throw on some clothes and called to her to let him come up. He was pale as a ghost and shaking so that he could hardly stand, but he managed to blurt out that he'd heard Perseus yelling from the terrace, and when he got there he saw Mrs. Leigh lying sprawled half-way down the terrace as if she had fallen. She was still in the dress she'd worn last night, he said, and there was something about the way she was lying that told him the truth even before he'd scrambled down to her and lifted her head to turn her over. Then he saw that she'd been dead some time—hours—and he rushed over for me. I tell you, Peterby, I don't know how I finished dressing and got over there, but you know what I found!"

"I know!" Peterby shuddered again. "Go on!"

"Well, I thought she had fallen from the terrace above, of course, and I saw at a glance that she was long past all help, poor little woman! I had sense enough, though, to order Lon and Perseus not to touch her till I'd 'phoned for the constable and Doctor Oakes, and then I went back and stood guard over her until they came. Peterby, this is a frightful blow! She was a wonderful woman, wonderful! I—I can't realize it!"

"Father, is it true?" a hysterical voice shrilled at

them from the hall-way as they entered, and Rosalie appeared suddenly before them. Clad in a dressing-gown, with her golden hair falling over her shoulders and her small face blanched with terror, she looked like a little girl as she flung herself upon her father. "Is it true that Mrs. Leigh is—is dead?"

"Yes, Rosie, I'm afraid it is," he replied, pushing her from him but not ungently. "Run along back to your room and don't ask any more questions just yet; there's been an accident."

"Accident? Father, what is it? You shall tell me!" She broke into wild sobbing. "Dead! I can't believe it! Oh, I can't bear it!"

"Rosalie?" A calm, gentle voice sounded from the head of the stairs, and Mrs. Gresham descended. "Go to your room and dress, dear. This is a great shock to all of us, and I know how dreadfully you feel; but you must try to compose yourself."

"Mother! Mrs. Leigh is dead! Do you hear? Oh, I believe you're made of *wood!* She was so lovely, so wonderful to me! How can I com-compose myself? I wish I were dead, too!" Still sobbing convulsively, she flew up the stairs, and Mrs. Gresham held out her hand to Peterby.

"Good of you to come to us, Mr. Peterby. You look badly shaken, but no wonder! You have been with Will? You have seen her? I won't bother you with questions now. You must sit here and rest, and I'll ring for coffee." Her voice was deeply sorrowful and distressed, but she smiled faintly as she led him to a chair. "That's better, isn't it?"

He sank down, murmuring his thanks, but a new voice, sharp and quivering, sounded from the doorway:

"What's this I hear? Has that woman been done to death?"

CHAPTER V

THE CURIOSITY OF MISS PARRISH

AT the sound of that shrill trembling voice Gresham turned, and his wife started forward. Miss Parrish stood on the threshold, her angular face pallid save for the bright spot of color blazing on each high cheekbone.

"Hannah, a terrible thing has happened!" Mrs. Gresham drew her in and closed the door. "We don't know any of the details yet—at least, I don't—but Mr. Peterby has just come from there and Will was sent for immediately when—when poor Mrs. Leigh was first found."

"She's really dead?" Miss Parrish turned abruptly to Gresham. "What killed her?"

"It was believed at first that she fell down the terrace." Gresham's tones were cold and formal. "I sent for Oakes, and when he moved her he found that she had been otherwise injured—stabbed, in fact. He's there now, but he said he would follow up here as soon as possible."

"Stabbed!" Miss Parrish repeated in a lower, shocked tone, and her wide-set, light eyes blinked rapidly. "Henry told me she'd been murdered; he heard it at the garage where he went for gas, but he didn't get any details. Who did it? Has anybody got an idea?"

She looked past Gresham to Peterby, and he shook his head, but his thoughts reverted once more to the lurking intruder.

"I came with Steve the milkman; he stopped to tell me and bring me along," he explained. "When I saw Mrs. Leigh it was a little too much for me, and Gresham brought me here."

Miss Parrish sniffed.

"It's shocking, of course. I expect now we'll learn a few things we've been wondering about. I always said there was some mystery—"

"Oh, Hannah!" Mrs. Gresham protested. "Poor thing, to die so—so horribly! What could she have been doing out there alone and still in her dinner gown! Gibbie listened when Lon Corwin came for Will, and she told me. Will, do they suspect any one?"

"Certainly!" His tone was edged with sarcasm. "They've got the scoundrel locked up and calling a jury now to try him! You women can ask the most fool questions! Who is there to suspect?"

"The young man in the red car, for one!" Miss Parrish snapped suddenly. "When I asked Mrs. Leigh about him last night, he hadn't been near her, and she couldn't imagine who it might have been, but when I cornered her she remembered that he'd called —on the Ramsays! It didn't matter that they'd been gone a year, of course! He's the first visitor she had —the only one, as far as we know—and she lied about him! Why?"

"It was very early when Mrs. Leigh left, if you re-

member," Mrs. Gresham said slowly as if fixing the incident in her own mind. "She said she had a headache and must rest. I wonder how long it was after that that she died?"

"Mr. Peterby took her home." Miss Parrish turned again to him, her eyes seeming to bore into his dazed sick brain. "You were nearly an hour going next door and back! Did she complain any more of that headache, or say she meant to retire?"

"Yes, Peterby, that's so," Gresham chimed in. "You were the last of us to see her alive."

The last to see her alive! Peterby could feel his flesh creep.

"Good Lord, so I was!" he exclaimed helplessly. "She said her headache was better, and we sat for quite a few minutes on the upper terrace chatting. The last I saw of her she stood at the rail waving to me as I turned, before I reached the gate in the hedge. Jim Masters was in the rose garden and I stopped to speak to him before joining you at bridge. Say, there's something I want to know. Do you know of any man around this neighborhood who uses a strong scent—reeks of it? You could smell it a mile away, the kind I mean."

The two women stared at him, and Gresham opened his lips; but before he could speak Gibbie appeared with the coffee-tray. She was a lanky, lugubrious female of indeterminate age who had managed the household since before Rosalie's birth and was a privileged member of the family rather than a servant.

"I thought you'd all be better for a good solid

breakfast, but it's going to be long a-coming," she announced. "Cook's so upset she broke the pink cream pitcher and hid the grape-fruit knife on herself and burnt the handle off the coffee-pot. Oh, and I got a message for you, Mis' Gresham. Larry says to tell you something's trampled through one of the glass setting-out frames by the greenhouse. It's all broke and—"

"I thought I heard a crash of glass in the night," Mrs. Gresham interrupted. "Very well, Gibbie; tell Larry I'll attend to it."

When the woman had departed Gresham commented to his wife:

"Told you we ought to have that kitchen garden fenced in, but no, you would put up a sickly flower hedge! Peterby, what did you mean about a man who reeked of scent?"

"Just that." Peterby wriggled uneasily. "I didn't intend to say anything about it till I'd told Doc Oakes, but last night when I came back through the gate something rustled in the shrubbery and I got a whiff of an odor almost like a skunk but spicy, too. Nothing moved or answered when I asked who was there, but when I started toward where the sound came from there was a crash, and whatever it was went through the hedge, straight through! I didn't want to alarm Mrs. Leigh or I would have followed."

"Good thing for you that you didn't; it probably *was* a skunk!" Gresham shrugged. "Old Theron Bemis killed one in his barn last week. As to there being any mystery about Mrs. Leigh, Hannah, that's

sheer malice. She has lived among us for a year, and I defy anybody to utter a word against our charming neighbor. She was a notable addition to the social life of our community, and I profoundly regret her death!"

"Humph!" Miss Parrish ejaculated. Then she added in a softer tone: "The manner of it was frightful, there's no gainsaying that, but I guess our community will worry along socially just as it did before she came, and I didn't notice then that we lacked anything that made for contentment and neighborliness! Here's Daniel now! I know his step."

Some one had mounted the steps of the balcony and entered through the music-room; and they gazed expectantly at the doorway as Dr. Oakes appeared, nodded to all of them, and sank into the nearest chair.

"Thanks, Nellie. I need it." He took the cup of coffee Mrs. Gresham offered and drained it in one draught. "No more, no. I've bundled all the servants out to the garage and locked the house. The body is on its way down to my office for the autopsy, and I'll have to run on myself in a few minutes. This is the toughest proposition we've ever been called upon to handle. I wish you'd tell me again, Gresham, just what Lon Corwin said and how he acted when he came for you."

Gresham complied and Miss Parrish exclaimed:

"How he acted! Good gracious, Daniel, you don't suspect Lon, do you?"

"I suspect nobody—and everybody!" the doctor retorted. "With nothing to start on, no clue or even

hint of a motive, every one in this community is equally open to question!"

"Why just this community?" she asked. "How about that young man in the red car yesterday who Mrs. Leigh denied was at her house till I pinned her down to it? Mr. Peterby smelled out something last night, too!"

Peterby grinned in a sickly fashion at her ill-timed jest and repeated what he had told the others, but again he said nothing about Mrs. Leigh's apprehension of the intruder's presence. That, and the incident of the waistcoat button with the odd green stone, he would keep for the doctor's private ear.

"How long has Mrs. Leigh been dead, Dan?" Mrs. Gresham asked.

"Not more than about six or seven hours now, and it's nearly eight," the doctor replied. "That would fix the time of death as approximately one or two o'clock this morning, but I can tell more accurately after the autopsy."

"There isn't a possibility that the wound—Will says it looks like a stab—might have been made in some way when she fell?" Mrs. Gresham pursued. "It seems too utterly horrible to think of—of actual murder! She wore a diamond bar brooch last night, if you remember, that was fully five inches long, and she told me herself only last week that she'd had the platinum pin removed and a steel one substituted because it was more secure. Couldn't that pin have—"

She hesitated, and the doctor shook his head.

"No. It was still fastened at her breast when I

reached there this morning, and the wound was a good two inches below and toward the left, while the pin pointed to the right. I have it here, together with the rest of the jewelry she wore, and I don't think anything is missing. Do you recall what she had on?"

"I do," Miss Parrish volunteered. "She was usually pretty careful not to put on too much, I've noticed; but last night she'd got herself up like a blue-ribbon winner at a county fair, and being as she's gone I won't say what kind of exhibit! Anyway, she wore a dinner ring the size of a soup-plate, and a diamond bracelet and three other large diamonds on the left hand, and long drop earrings. Besides that, of course, there was that heathenish diamond wedding-ring instead of an honest gold one!"

"She didn't have any rosettes or buckles or dewdabs on her slippers, did she?" Peterby inquired.

"Mercy, no! They went out long ago," returned Miss Parrish. "She didn't have to draw attention to her feet; they were small enough and she knew it!"

"Hannah!" Mrs. Gresham expostulated mildly. "You never liked Mrs. Leigh, I knew, but now that such a terrible thing has happened to her—"

"I don't see any reason for liking her any better because some one has put her out of the way," the spinster asserted grimly. "I'm honestly sorry for her and I don't believe in taking human life, legally or illegally, but about the only feeling I've got in the matter is a very lively curiosity. If you should take it into your head, Daniel, to suspect me along with the rest because of my plain speaking, I've got an

alibi in one of the few teeth Maggie's got left; it ached all night, and I was up with her."

"Don't be ridiculous, Hannah!" The doctor rose. "I shall have to get on down to the office. If you don't want to be bothered with a horde of reporters and morbid sightseers, Nellie, you'd better tell Gibbie not to answer the door at all. This thing is going to make a big stir in the city press because of Mrs. Leigh's social position and money."

"The money was self-evident, but just what was Mrs. Leigh's social position before she came here?" Miss Parrish demanded. "She was a lady, she obeyed the ordinary rules of convention, but just who was she? That's one of the things I'm looking forward to discovering."

A faint, odd smile flitted for an instant over the doctor's homely, rugged face.

"I think you'll find she was not exactly a nobody," he said quietly. "Coming my way, Cornelius?"

Peterby rose with alacrity.

"I was going to ask you to give me a lift, Doc," he responded. "Steve brought me with the milk, and I don't feel up to the two miles home. Thanks for the coffee, Mrs. Gresham. If there's anything I can do for any of you I hope your husband will let me know."

As they left the house together the doctor observed:

"You've got something more to tell me. I could see it in your eye, and that's why I didn't press you for details before the others."

"Yes, I have," Peterby admitted. "I don't suppose it amounts to anything, but you must take it for what

it's worth. However, it will keep—have you heard about the broken hothouse frame?"

He repeated Gibbie's message from the gardener and the doctor stared.

"Cornelius, you're sharper than I gave you credit for being! Come on and we'll have a look at it."

They walked around the house and into the trim, flower-bordered kitchen garden, dismantled now save for the winter vegetables. An elderly figure in a broad-brimmed hat and faded overalls was bending over the parsley bed, but it straightened at their approach.

"Good-morning, Larry," the doctor said. "Hear you had a little accident last night to one of the frames."

"Yes, doctor. Some critter got loose, I reckon, and stomped right through it. Cut itself, too, for there's a little blood around. Want to see it?"

He led the way to a row of low, slanting frames whose glass tops glistened in the sun beside the long greenhouses, and pointed to the one at the end. Only jagged slivers remained in the casing, and through the aperture the gleaming fragments had apparently been trampled into the soft earth, while a few drops of dried blood appeared on the white frame-work.

"It wasn't any stray dog nor cat did it, for the glass was thick and strong enough to hold up their weight, just running across quick," Larry remarked. "It would take a horse or a cow—or a man—to smash it in like that. I didn't hear it, because I don't hear anything once I get to sleep, and it was all right when I took a last look round before going to bed."

"What time was that?" asked the doctor.

"'Bout eleven, later than usual for me, but the young folks were dancing and making such a racket that I knew it wouldn't be any use trying to sleep. If the grass didn't grow clear up to the base of the frame all 'round we could maybe tell what it was did it." Larry rubbed his chin reflectively and added: "Think maybe might have been the feller that murdered Mrs. Leigh?"

"He wouldn't have gone crashing through the neighbors' property to draw attention to himself," the doctor dissented hastily. "I wondered if anybody'd been badly cut, that was all. Come on, Cornelius."

They went back to the little car drawn up before the house, and as it bore them down the driveway Peterby looked over toward Ivy Terrace. The group on the shelving ledge of lawn had dispersed, but in the roadway below an augmented crowd of motor cars and farm wagons had been separated and drawn back into two compact masses by ropes stretched across the thoroughfare, leaving a cleared space in front of the estate.

"Matt's doing things properly," the doctor observed with approval. "I 'phoned to the district attorney over to New Gideon asking him to send the sheriff back, and when he heard what was up he said Rufus Creech would be along, too. Kind of putting it over, to send one of the detectives from his office at this stage of the game, as if we weren't equal to taking care of our own troubles. Do you know Creech?"

"Never saw him, but I read of him in the county

paper in connection with the Cruikshank murder." Peterby looked thoughtful. "Where do you come in on this? Just make your diagnosis after the autopsy and let it go at that?"

The doctor shook his head.

"I have my own investigation to make and then an inquest to hold, to examine possible witnesses and try to find out who is guilty. We're not up-to-date enough here yet to have a medical examiner instead of coroner. The sheriff carries on his own investigation independent of mine, and the county authorities can take a hand if they see fit, the way the district attorney has done now, and send one of their own experts to tackle it from his angle. There'll be plenty of us on the job, Cornelius, and it looks as if it would take all of us to get at the truth. What was it that you didn't tell me back at Rose Acre?"

Peterby moistened his lips.

"Well," he began, "when I was taking Mrs. Leigh home and we reached that gate in the hedge she was going to say 'goodnight' to me there, but she looked past me, over my shoulder, and seemed to get as rigid as stone from fright. I looked, too, but I couldn't see anything, and when I offered to investigate she said it wasn't necessary, that it was probably just nerves on her part. I thought it was, too, but she didn't object to my taking her to her door. On the upper terrace we stopped to chat for a few minutes before I took my leave, and I couldn't help but see that she wasn't paying attention. She kept looking down toward the gate as if she still thought she saw something there.

There was another thing, too, that happened on that terrace—"

He stopped abruptly, and his companion said:

"Go on, Cornelius; this may be important."

"It'll sound like rotten gossip, Doc, especially in view of the frightful thing that has happened, but I think some one else had been there before us—a man."

He repeated the incident of the waistcoat button, and the doctor whistled softly as he drew up in front of his own gate.

"Come in for a while, Cornelius; I want to talk to you."

Before either of them had alighted, however, the stout comfortable figure of Miss Charlotte, Dr. Oakes' sister and housekeeper, appeared on the porch.

"Dan, there's a hurry call come in for you from old Theron Bemis; they think he's dying."

CHAPTER VI

THE DEATH-STROKE

"BLAME his cantankerous old hide!" Doctor Oakes exclaimed with some asperity. "That means he's gotten out of bed in spite of my orders! Well, I suppose the autopsy'll have to wait an hour. Broken ribs aren't usually so serious, but Theron's over eighty."

"Then you can drop me at the bungalow on your way," suggested Peterby, with a smiling nod to Miss Charlotte as he relieved her of the doctor's familiar shabby black bag.

"The body was brought here all right?" the latter asked his sister.

"Yes, Dan. In your office." Her kindly face was saddened. "It's terrible, isn't it? I'll keep everybody out, of course, till you get back."

They proceeded down the shady street in silence, save for the doctor's absent-minded responses to occasional greetings from his neighbors. An almost Sabbath hush had fallen over the community; but women gathered in dooryards, and men before the village shops and post-office were all obviously discussing the tragedy, and they stopped to stare after the small car as it passed.

"The news didn't take long to travel," Peterby commented. "You've all been in Edenvale for so many

generations that I'm comparatively still a newcomer, but I've got a kind of personal local pride in seeing you clear up the mystery of this thing without interference from the county seat, and if I could help I'd like to."

"Maybe you have," responded his companion. "There was some one hanging around that gate in the hedge between Rose Acre and Ivy Terrace; Mrs. Leigh suspected it, if she didn't actually know, and didn't want you to investigate, but coming back you nearly had him. That perfume, or whatever it was, ought to be a factor in tracing him, but I'm looking forward to some new developments when I've had time to go over her effects at the house. That waistcoat button with a green stone in it—sounds kind of flashy and foreign, doesn't it? So does that scent. Mrs. Leigh's lived abroad—Italy, for sure—but we didn't learn that in all this year till Rosalie let it out last night. Cornelius, we've got strange days before us."

"I wouldn't let myself believe it!" Peterby shook his head. "I flattered myself I was a man of the world and no woman could pull the wool over my eyes, but I swear I wouldn't accept the possibility of there being any mystery in connection with the past of such a charming woman. I don't believe even now that she was anything but the innocent victim of some murderous wretch, but—"

He paused with a sigh and the doctor finished for him.

"But even a murderer must have some reason good

and sufficient for himself, unless he's a madman. Mrs. Leigh hadn't an enemy in the world as far as we know, but we don't know anything yet, and that's how the matter stands. If you've nothing else to do, run down to the house around noon and I'll tell you what the autopsy reveals; I'd rather like to talk the affair over with you, Cornelius; you're the only one that's got even a ghost of a clue."

Leaving Peterby at his gateway the doctor drove on to the weatherbeaten old farmhouse farther out in the country, meditating on the tragic event of the morning. He shrewdly suspected that his friend was harder hit than he admitted, and he wondered what had taken place the previous evening between him and the woman now dead. He was fully aware of the fascination Mrs. Leigh had exercised over not only Peterby and Gresham but over various other male members of their little coterie, although he himself had been immune to it; and he had studied her with interest, gauging her more truly from his lifelong knowledge of human nature than even Peterby guessed.

At the door of the Bemis farm a slatternly, worn-faced woman, with a not over-clean youngster clinging to her faded skirts, came to receive him, and the doctor descended.

"Good morning, Jennie. Father had a bad turn?"

"Yes. Hear him? He says he's dying, Doctor." She led the way into the entry, where prolonged groans in a quavering aged voice came from behind a closed door.

"Sounds pretty hearty," the doctor commented.

"Jennie, tell me the truth! He's been getting up, hasn't he?"

She cast an apprehensive glance toward the door.

"You know we can't do nothing with him unless we tie him!" she declared in a discreetly lowered tone. "He was real tractable yesterday, 'specially after you come, but last night Lilly got loose and went off on a rampage. She's the young Jersey cow and awful wild. We thought Pa was asleep, but he must've heard the hired men talking in the kitchen, for if he didn't get up and dress himself and go out to find her! Lilly broke loose around ten and I didn't miss Pa till eleven, when I thought I'd better get up and go see why he was so quiet, not snoring nor groaning nor nothing. I had the men out looking for him, but it wasn't till after midnight that he come back, leading Lilly; and it was all we could do to get him abed again, he was so far gone. I wanted to send for you then, but he wouldn't hear of it till this morning when the pain got the best of him."

"Well, we'll see what we can do with him." The doctor started for the door but paused suddenly. "He didn't fall down and get hurt, did he? Cut himself, I mean?"

"Pa?" The woman looked at him in surprise. "No, he ain't hurt none, except his side that you'd plastered up. Why, are there blood tracks out by the gate? Lilly's forelegs have got gashes in them like she'd tried to paw through somebody's window; but Pa's too sick to say where he found her, and we ain't heard no complaints from the neighbors."

"All right. Got a kettle of hot water on the stove? I'll call when I want it."

He turned the knob and entered a dim stuffy bedroom where the sufferer lay in a great four-poster bed, his weazened frame barely outlined under the vivid patchwork quilt.

"I'll lay Jennie's told on me!" he quavered between short, painful breaths. "None of them worth their salt when the old man's laid up! I had to—go get Lilly."

"Theron, you're an old fool," the doctor remarked in a matter-of-fact tone as he examined the patient. "Got to put you in a fresh cast, and this time if you don't stay in bed I'll move you over to the hospital at New Gideon. You know what that'll cost you? Quiet now till I've finished. Jennie, will you bring that water?"

Old Theron Bemis glowered and groaned but submitted to the doctor's ministrations, and when they were over the latter observed:

"Heard the news? But I guess you know more about it than the rest of us, seeing where you found Lilly."

"News?" Theron Bemis perked up his head like a bald old eagle from the thin pillow. "How d'you know where I found Lilly?"

"I know she went through a glass forcing-frame outside the Gresham greenhouse," Dr. Oakes responded, watching his patient narrowly. "Then you trailed her over to Ivy Terrace before you caught her. *What did you see there?*"

It was a mere random shot, but he waited anxiously for the reply. The old man blinked rapidly but was silent for a moment. Then he laughed in a shrill cackle that ended in a groan.

"Think you're right smart, Doc, don't you? I never was no hand to gossip 'bout the neighbors, strange wimmen or no!"

"Strange wimmen!" his daughter put in avidly. "You mean Mrs. Leigh, Pa? What'd you see? What's the doctor getting at?"

"None of your business, Jennie," the old man snapped, but his tongue was loosened. "It was right late, nigh half-past 'leven, I calc'late, but the dancing party was still going on at the Greshams'. I seen Mis' Leigh up on the terrace in front of her house, and there was a man with her. I was heading Lilly off on the side lawn, 'fraid she'd start hoofing it down the terrace and break her fool legs, so I come up real close to them 'round the corner of the house. Mis' Leigh was talking real quick, like she was madder'n a hornet but kind of scared, too, and the man's voice was deep like a bass-drum. I didn't hear what they was saying; I was minding my own business, not wanting to be caught there with Lilly after her smashing things 'round that greenhouse next door; but they was too took up with their own affairs to see me or hear Lilly's feet on the soft grass—she was too wore out by then, anyway, to cut up any more. Just's I got her by the rope, where she'd twitched it loose, and started to lead her to the drive that goes out behind

the garage, I looked back at them two on the terrace, and I'll be gosh-danged if the feller didn't have his arms 'round Mis' Leigh!"

He had spoken with short, broken pauses, and now, as he halted for breath, his daughter exclaimed:

"My land! And her a widow woman!"

"Widders get married again," the old man cackled once more. "Mis' Leigh's a fine figger of a woman, and if she wants to go sparking in broad moonlight on her own terrace, it ain't any worse'n the young folks' carryings-on these days."

"Who was the man with her, Theron?" the doctor asked, adding mendaciously: "Somebody else saw them, too, but they couldn't make out who he was."

"I couldn't, neither, 'cept he was a stranger. I ain't never seen him 'round these parts before; gre't big feller he was, and fleshy too, with dark hair sticking up like a rooster's comb. Doc, that pain's coming back like a house a-fire!"

"I'll give you something to quiet it, and then you mustn't talk any more." The doctor took a pellet from a small vial and turned for the cup of water which Jennie held out. "Tell me this, though, Theron; was that the last you saw of them, there on the terrace, when the man had his arms around her?"

"Yep,—but what's all the to-do about?" The old man blinked shrewdly once more. "Ain't no scandal 'bout it, is there?"

"Scandal and worse about what happened later; if I don't tell you the neighbors will, but you better not

say too much about what you saw unless you want to spend a lot of time before frost over at New Gideon, answering questions. Mrs. Leigh is dead, and it looks like murder."

Jennie screamed sharply, and the old man shrunk down visibly in the bed.

"Murder! Land o' Goshen! And I got to be laid up just now, where I can't hear nothing of what's going on!"

Leaving the old man to his lamentations, Dr. Oakes strode out to his car and drove rapidly away. As he passed Peterby's place the latter was nowhere to be seen, but promptly at noon he appeared in the village in his own car and presented himself at the doctor's office.

His round face was still pale and strained from the shock of the earlier morning, but the first horror had given place to an all-consuming interest, and his expression was preternaturally grave and determined. As he walked down the side path and mounted the steps of the little stoop a young man slipped from his perch on the rail and confronted him.

" 'Morning, Mr. Peterby," he said briskly. "Hear you were the last of the neighbors to see Mrs. Leigh alive last night. Took her home from Rose Acre, didn't you? See anything unusual, any strangers hanging around?"

"Hello, Jellicoe." Peterby eyed the young local reporter with small welcome. "I don't know that I was the last to see Mrs. Leigh; I took her home early, not later than nine, and we talked for about half an

hour on the terrace. I left her there. Sorry I can't give you any dope for the 'Trumpet,' but I didn't see any one."

"Think again, Mr. Peterby!" Sam Jellicoe grinned ingratiatingly. "You smelled 'em, though, didn't you? I've been talking to Gibbie Wiggin, who works for the Greshams; she heard what you told 'em this morning about somebody reeking with scent that you ran into by the gate in the hedge."

"I didn't run into anybody." Peterby shook his head. "Thought I smelled something like barber's junk, but there wasn't any one there. Can't prove anything by me."

"But what do you think, yourself?" The reporter took another tack. "You talked alone with her for half an hour; did she act nervous, as if she was expecting somebody or afraid they'd come? Do you think she put in an appearance at the Greshams just for a bluff, and left early with a headache for an excuse, so that she could keep a private date that might have been forced on her?"

"No, I don't. Mrs. Leigh's manner was as calm and gracious as usual." Peterby reddened. "I haven't formed any opinion whatever about this frightful affair, Jellicoe; it's beyond me. I've got an appointment now with the doctor."

He made as if to pass his persistent interviewer, but at that moment a weazened, long-nosed little man of about thirty-five peered around the corner of the house and then came spryly along the path.

"Mr. Cornelius Peterby?" he asked, his tones nasal

and penetrating. "I was going to your house, but the coroner said you'd be here. I'd like a word with you, sir, in the parlor; I'm Creech, from the district attorney's office at New Gideon."

Creech the interloper! Peterby snorted, but he followed the detective around to the front of the house and into the parlor.

"Now, Mr. Peterby, I've heard all about your encounter with somebody in the shrubbery after you left Mrs. Leigh last night, and we'll look into it later." Creech rubbed his pointed chin as if stroking the whiskers which, from its blue-white tinge, had recently adorned it, and his small close-set eyes twinkled with a light that Peterby found baleful. "What I want from you is every word that passed between you and the woman last night."

"Do you?" Peterby's gorge rose. "Well, confound your impertinence! Nothing whatever passed between us, nothing that wouldn't be said by the most casual acquaintances."

"I see." Creech nodded coolly. "Made love to her, did you?"

"One word more out of you in that line, my man, and I'll push it down your throat!" Peterby sputtered, almost apoplectic with indignation. "I had the utmost respect and admiration for Mrs. Leigh, and esteemed her highly as a neighbor, but I—I'm a confirmed bachelor—it's preposterous, insufferable!"

"Oh, all right. We'll let it go at that." Creech was evidently accustomed to threats of personal violence. "Remember I'm representing the district at-

torney, and if you don't want to answer me you can come over and talk to him. Now, then, did you quarrel?"

"Certainly not!" Peterby was mindful of the warning but controlled himself with difficulty. "We discussed the dinner party and the charming appearance of the young lady in whose honor it was given, and Mrs. Leigh invited me to tea this afternoon. I don't recall anything further about the conversation."

"This afternoon, eh? Rushing it, were you?" Creech rubbed his chin again, and his small eyes twinkled more than ever. "Mr. Peterby, was the lady to give you some sort of an answer then?"

"Answer? What about? Look here, you blithering fool, I'll go over and talk to the district attorney all right, but it'll be to have you broke!" Peterby exploded. "You rube flatfoot!"

"What's the row, Cornelius?" Dr. Oakes' voice sounded behind him, and he wheeled.

"This long-nosed pest has been insinuating that—that I paid attentions to Mrs. Leigh! That I—I proposed to her! I'll see him in Hades before I answer any more of his impudent questions!"

"You have answered them, Mr. Peterby." Creech smirked, and sidled toward the door. "Later I may have some more for you, but just now I've other business. Good-day."

Peterby gazed after him in speechless wrath, but the doctor shook his head.

"Don't mind him, that's just his way, and he's a smart fellow. Better not antagonize him; he feeds

the county papers, and he can make you a laughing-stock without anything actionable that would give you a come-back."

"A laughing-stock! Me!" Peterby mopped his forehead.

"As a disappointed admirer of the lady. This isn't the city, you know," Dr. Oakes added soothingly. "If you show a lady any ordinary attentions here they're magnified, especially at a time like this, and I suppose he's heard some idle gossip. Cornelius, I've performed the autopsy."

There was something in his grave change of tone that made Peterby forget his own resentment.

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly. "What did you find out? Was there any other injury beside that—that stab wound?"

"No, but it was made by the strangest sort of weapon you ever heard of! Some surgical knives are not unlike what it must be in shape, but they are sharper and make a cleaner incision. The blade that was used was curved; not hooked around at the edge like a scythe, but curled over from tip to hilt almost like a scoop, and it wasn't so very long either. Long enough though to enter two inches above the heart and curve downward in a quarter-circle to penetrate it."

"Great heavens!" Peterby shuddered. "I never heard of a knife like that! What an extraordinary, horrible thing! Do you suppose it's some foreign-made affair?"

"I don't know. The blade was apparently of al-

most even width and thickness; and it must have been of mighty good steel, or it would have snapped and remained in the wound with the very force of the death-stroke! It wasn't easy to withdraw it, and it made a rather ragged tear. The murderer must have had nerve to stop and worry it out of her breast."

"Don't! Gad, it's frightful!" Peterby's color had faded, and his face took on a greenish hue. "There's one thing, though; with a weapon so unusual you've only got to find it and you'll have your hands on the murderer!"

CHAPTER VII

CORNELIUS PETERBY, DEPUTY

"THAT'S sound reasoning, Cornelius, but where would you have me look for it?" Dr. Oakes shrugged. "The murderer wouldn't have taken the trouble, nor risked waiting to remove it from the wound, if he hadn't meant to take it away with him. You don't think he threw it in the hedge, do you?"

"I'd look, anyway!" Peterby asserted stoutly. "Look here, Doc, I may be an awful dub, and you're coroner now; you'll think it's pretty nervy, but I'd like to see this through with you. Couldn't you make me deputy or something? That Creech has got my goat and, although I don't pretend to be an amateur sleuth, I've got good common sense and I see a lot. I want you to beat him to it, and I'd like to help."

His tone was so unconsciously wistful and pleading that the doctor smiled.

"Why, of course, old man!" he said heartily. "I asked you to drop in so that I could talk it over with you—the case, I mean. There's no one in Edenvale I'd rather consult with, and you've seen more of the world than the rest of us, know more about the sort of people Mrs. Leigh had probably been associated with before she came here. Come down now and I'll have you sworn in as a deputy; then, after Charlotte

gives us some lunch, we'll go up to Ivy Terrace together and look over the effects. I think we'll find something interesting."

Peterby agreed with alacrity. He had not told his friend that he had a further motive for his interest in the tragic affair than antagonism toward the county detective; but a chivalrous desire burned within his rotund, commonplace exterior to do a final service for the woman who had captivated his middle-aged heart, and he was determined that her murderer should be brought to justice.

The oath sworn to, he returned to the doctor's house earnestly impressed with the importance of his new position. He ate little of the simple meal Miss Charlotte put before them, for the thought of that other, silent guest lying under the same roof could not be exorcised, and it was with profound relief that he heard the doctor's announcement of their immediate start for Ivy Terrace.

But the train which had come in during lunch-time bore a fresh contingent of reporters from the city who deferred their visit to the scene of the crime so that they might endeavor to obtain from the coroner the result of the autopsy, and a way had literally to be forced through the importunate group to the little car waiting just beyond the gate.

There, perched upon its runningboard, they found Creech.

"Thought you'd be about ready to start, Doctor," he remarked. "I'll go through the house with you, and we'll see what we can dig up."

"Thanks. I won't need any assistance except from my deputy, Mr. Peterby, here," the doctor responded dryly. "The keys will be at your disposal after the inquest, of course, but I'll be glad to give you a lift if you're going out to look over the grounds."

Creech grinned, not at all abashed.

"Your deputy, eh? Wants to see it through? All right, Doctor, if that's the way you feel about it we'll wait our turn." He swung off with a wave of his dry weazened hand, and Peterby watched him go with grim satisfaction.

"We shall have a formal protest now about our lack of coöperative spirit, from the district attorney's office, but I guess we can stand it," the doctor observed. "We'll have the first innings, anyway."

The road in the vicinity of Ivy Terrace was even more thronged with vehicles than during the earlier hours; the heterogeneous mass of cars, wagons and motorcycles extended well in front of Rose Acre. At the latter house it was evident that the doctor's suggestion had been followed. The shades had all been drawn, and the only signs of life about the place were reporters who had arrived by an earlier train and were vainly besieging the unresponsive bell.

Constable Matt Isley was still importantly patrolling the foot of the steps leading up the center of the terrace to the front door. He waved a half-eaten sandwich in greeting.

"Sheriff's here, Doctor," he announced. "There he is, coming around from the back of the house. There's

talk of a crazy loon got loose from the Aspendale asylum two days ago and headed this way last they saw of him; some say he 'most killed two nurses, but he's a rich pay patient from the city and they're keeping it quiet. Sheriff thinks we'd better get a posse out—"

"Hello, Doc! 'Afternoon, Mr. Peterby!" The sheriff's long, lanky legs bore him down the terrace steps three at a time. "Got around to the autopsy yet?"

He attempted to draw the doctor aside, but the latter explained:

"Mr. Peterby's been sworn in as my deputy, Anse. They're a lot of points coming up in this case that he can help me handle, being a city man himself, like most of Mrs. Leigh's friends. I suppose you know Rufe Creech is on the job?"

The question was craftily inserted after the dubious announcement, and the sheriff's angular face darkened.

"Yep, I know!" He spat in disgust. "What's he come poking his nose over here for, anyway? We've got the murderer, or we will have soon's we lay hands on the lunatic that escaped from Aspendale. That's the only answer to this case!"

"If you'll tell me where *he* could lay hands on a steel knife with a flat, narrow blade, curved like a hook, I'll be glad to see you gather him in," Dr. Oakes observed. "That's what the murder was committed with, and I don't know of anything like it being used around an insane asylum. I'm more interested in a dark-

haired, deep-voiced stranger, a big fellow, tall and stout. He was with Mrs. Leigh on the terrace here at half-past eleven last night."

Leaving Sheriff Anse Crofutt staring, he went on up the steps with Peterby stumbling at his heels, overcome with amazement at this latest disclosure. When they reached the top the latter gasped:

"So there was some one here, after all! This big stranger of yours, was he the sweet-scented individual hanging around the gate? No wonder he crashed right through the hedge! You didn't speak of him before."

"I hadn't time; only found out about him after I left you at your place this morning." He told of the adventure of old Theron Bemis in search of his wandering cow which brought him within sight of the two figures on the terrace and added: "I don't figure on his being the murderer, though; from what Theron said they seemed to be on mighty good terms."

Peterby darted a swift glance at him but asked for no details. That was the man who had been there before and dropped the waistcoat button which Mrs. Leigh recognized and tried to conceal! If he were a welcome visitor, why the secrecy, and why had she been so troubled, so nervously anxious to temporize with Peterby himself and get him away quickly? For she undoubtedly had, he was forced to admit that now; she had asked him to come at four today merely to be rid of him then! What a fatuous fool he had been!

"Wait here a minute, Cornelius. I'm going to the

garage to get Perseus or Lopey to show us over the house first. They'll know where things are—letters and so on—and we can look at them privately afterwards."

He was gone, and Peterby sat down heavily on a bench—the same stone seat where he had been with Mrs. Leigh so short a time before! He tried to imagine her stabbed, thrown over the railing to pitch down and down from one terrace level to another and finally to lie, in a headlong heap, dead!

The effort sickened him, and he closed his eyes. If this great brute had killed her, he, Peterby, would track him to the ends of the earth! What if he were her husband? What if 'Leigh' existed in the flesh? Peterby's eyes opened quickly at the thought. She had never said in so many words whether she were a widow or divorced; for that matter he had taken it for granted that she was free when she might not have been! She had only agreed to a friendship with him, said she had never considered anything more. . . .

Peterby could feel his brain reeling, but at this juncture the doctor returned with stout, deep-breasted Calliope Griggs waddling in the rear. Her usually smiling face was still horror-struck, and there was a pallor beneath her naturally dusky skin; but a life-time of well-trained service had given her a reserve force of control, and she bobbed a greeting to Peterby.

" 'Aftuhnoon, suh! Doctuh Oakes done tell us what kill po' Mis' Leigh. I ain't nevah heah o' no sech a knife, and I ain't seen nothin' o' nobody las' night."

"Got the keys for inside, Lopey? We'll go in where

the crowd can't see us, and then you tell us what you do know about last night. You saw Mrs. Leigh before she went over to Rose Acre to dinner?"

He added the question as they entered the dim wide hallway and the door closed with a dull reverberation behind them.

"Yessuh, that's the las' I evah did see o' her ontel Pershus hollored out f'om the terrace this mo'ning and I come a-runnin'! I dressed her nice fo' Miss Rosalie's pahty, and I axes her should I wait up, and she say no, that she gwine be late. I didn't neither; I went to bed, aftuh Pershus locked up all but the side door where she usually come in at, and that was befo' nine, cos' my feet was botherin' me. I didn't hear one thing ontel Pershus hollored—"

"All right," the doctor interrupted. "You and Perseus have worked for Mrs. Leigh ever since she came here, haven't you?"

"Yessuh, and we got Pershus's sister Julie Ann to come oveh f'om the judge's at New Gideon and cook fo' her. She took Lon Corwin the gardener f'om the Ramsays—he's been here five yeahs and mo'—and the chauffeur come with her."

"Cesare? From where?"

Lopey shook her head.

"Dunno. He's the mos' ontalk'ble pusson eveh I see, s'posen you could onderstan' him, w'ich ain't noways easy. Mis' Leigh, she speak to him in his own lan'widge."

The doctor and Peterby looked at each other, and then the former observed:

"It must be lonesome for him around here. Nobody else in the neighborhood has Italian chauffeurs."

"No. Mis' Leigh let him have frien's come out f'om the city to visut; he got his own rooms in the garage, separut f'om Lon Corwin's, and Lon say they play some kind o' gamblin' game on their fingers—"

"Did you ever see any of Cesare's friends?" The doctor interrupted her again.

"Sho' did. There's a little dark feller that acks like he was strung on wires, jumpy all the time. His name's Alfio. Then there's Luigi—he's got a scar clean 'crost his face like he been in some ruckus—and Tony. Tony's real elegant, with a mustache stickin' out like spikes, and smells gran' with perfume!" Lopey's tone had waxed enthusiastic, and again the eyes of Peterby and the doctor met. "He's the mos' polites's man—!"

"When were they here last—any of them?"

"Le's see. Tony and Alfio, they was heah together las' week come Sunday; Luigi, he ain't been 'roun' fo' nigh a month."

"Were they chauffeurs, too?"

"Nossuh. Leastways, Alfio is, fo' some foreign gen'leman in New York, but Luigi, he owns a fruit sto', and Tony, he don' do nothin'. I reckon he's some kind o' a sportin' man."

"I see. Lopey, did Mrs. Leigh herself ever have any company from the city before yesterday?"

"You done heah tell 'bout that young gen'leman that come in the cyar?" Lopey's voice dropped confidentially. "Nossuh, she ain't nevah had nobody else

call on her, and only three diff'runt folks evah telephome endurin' this whole yeah. We think it's mighty strange—Pershus and Julie Ann and me—but Lon Corwin say 't ain't none o' his bisniss. Mis' Leigh, she's out on the terrace yestiddy aftuhnoon, and she tell Pershus to bring tea to her out there, but she see the young gen'leman comin' in the cyar and she get in the house, real flustrated. She tell Pershus befo' evah the cyar reach the house to say that she ain't in, but she change her min' quick and say to show the gen'leman in the drawin'room and bring tea there fo' the two o' them. Me, I put on my bes' apron and take in the cinnamon toas' cos I want to get a look at that comp'ny, and he sho' is a fine man, young and handsome, and like he live mighty well and don' keer what he spen's. He ack mo' upsot than what Mis' Leigh was, befo' she see him, only like he was keepin' it down, and Mis' Leigh she jus's cool as a cucumber, but her eyes kind o' snap."

"Did you hear his name?"

"Sho' did; he tole Pershus to say that 'Mr. Lutrelle' was heah, but Mis' Leigh, she call him 'Montie'."

"Montford Lutrelle!" Peterby, the deputy, suddenly came to life. "Well-dressed but a little loud, was he, with a lot of jewelry? Dissipated looking, but with a pleasant, hearty manner?"

"Gran' manners and gran' clo'es, with a voice like a boy, but he look's if he's thirty or mo'." Lopey nodded. "He had a di'mon' on his finger big as a marble, and 'nother in his tie, and his hair slicked

down like it was ironed. He done stay 'bout a' hour, and Mis' Leigh, she showed him out herse'f. They talk low, but I guess maybe they had a quarr'l befo' he lef', 'cos he went off down the road kerslam! like all creation was aftuh him, and she come up to me with her eyes jus' cracklin' sparks, but she don' say nothin', and o' co'se, me, I don't say nothin' neither."

"Did Mr. Lutrelle ever telephone? Was he one of the three you spoke of?" Quite unconsciously Peterby had taken the inquiry out of the doctor's hands, and the latter seemed content to have it so. "Where is the 'phone here? Did you or Perseus answer when it rang?"

Lopey blinked at the volley of questions.

"No suh, Mr. Lutrelle nevah called up. The 'phome is in the liberry, with an extension up in Mis' Leigh's room, and she call f'om up there, mos'ly. I ain't nevah heah her call but one pusson, and he's de one call her back, but that ain't often, not mo'n once a month or so. That's Mr. Mitchell, and seem like he's a lawyer man, 'cos it's all 'bout bisniss and sellin' things, and sometimes they mos' quarr'l. She get up on her high hoss and tell him she knows her own affairs, and then ring off on him mo'n once!"

"Was Mrs. Leigh in communication with this Mr. Mitchell from the time she first moved here?" Peterby asked. "With the others, also? Who were they?"

"Yessuh, she call Mr. Mitchell now and again evah since the 'phome done got put in, but he was the onlies' one till 'bout seven months ago. Then fo' two-three weeks some comp'ny ring Mis' Leigh up ev'y day or

so. They talk fo' the longes' time, but she jus' say yes and no, and is they sho' that's reli'ble. Mo' times than one she win' up by remin'in' them that it's stric'ly confidenshul."

"What was the name of this company?" Peterby's tone had quickened. "If you don't know perhaps Perseus does?"

"I got it wrote down, 'cos they started callin' again 'bout two months ago, and one time Mis' Leigh was out in her cyar and Pershus oveh to New Gideon. Reckon if I done put it in the liberry table drawer it's there yet."

Lopey whisked open a closed door at the left and disappeared and the doctor asked in an undertone:

"Who is Montford Lutrelle?"

"One of the most spectacular gamblers on the Stock Exchange, extraordinarily successful, too." Peterby's mouth was set in unaccustomed lines. "He's only about thirty-two or three, but he's provided the papers with a lot of front-page scandal; made his wife divorce him a year or two ago, after she'd stuck to him —tell you later!"

He added the last hurriedly as Lopey reappeared.

"Heah 'tis; Lang & Longstreet. I done put it away real keerful."

"Lang & Longstreet!" Peterby repeated. "Good Lord, what—! Never mind that now. You say they began telephoning to Mrs. Leigh about seven months ago and then again two months back. Who was the other party who called up? You told us there were three."

"Yessuh. The third gen'leman was 'Mr. Shell'—somethin'. I answers the 'phome myse'f that time—it was only once, las' week—and Mis' Leigh, she like to have a fit! She lock herse'f in the liberry and switch off the extension, so all I could heah was her sayin' no, but her voice was hoarse and husky-like, and madder'n evah I heah it! She flew out aftuh in a reg'lar tantrum, and lock herse'f in her room and won't eat any lunch, nor hardly answer, but when Miss Rosalie come oveh, 'bout four o'clock, she come down as sweet and smilin' 's if she'd nevah been ruffled in her life! Miss Rosalie, she was jus' crazy 'bout Mis' Leigh, but Mis' Leigh don' nevah notice her, 'ceptin' to be polite, like she always was to all the neighbors, fo' the first six months she was here. Then she done took up Miss Rosalie, and they got thicker'n peas in a pod in no time. She even onlocked the piano fo' her!"

"Unlocked the piano?" the doctor interjected.

"Yessuh. The piano was moved in locked, and when I ax her fo' the key so's I could dus' it, she say that piano ain't nevah gwine be onlocked, that she only kep' it 'cos it was give to her."

"You mean the gold one in the drawing-room?" The doctor looked thoughtful. "That's so, I don't believe I ever heard her play."

"No mo' she did, even aftuh she opened it fo' Miss Rosalie. Once las' summer, 'long 'bout twilight, I see her sittin' at it like she was gwine to play, but she jus' res' her hands on the keys, 'sif she was thinkin', and then went up to her room fo' the longes' time. I don' reckon she keered 'bout music, much."

"Did Mrs. Leigh receive a great deal of mail?"

"No, suh. Pershus tended to that, but the onlies' letters that come fo' her, 'ceptin' the reg'lar bills and invites f'om folks 'round here, was now and again a letter with Mr. Mitchell's name up in the corner. Lots o' them she tears up, but mo' she take and lock away in the garret; she got a powerful lot o' trunks and boxes up there, but she didn't let nobody tech them but herse'f. The keys was kep' in the wall safe she had put in her room."

"Do you know the combination?"

"Not me! I seen her open it many a time, but I nevah did get what numbahs she stopped it at."

"Very well, Lopey. You've got the keys to the garret, though, and all the other rooms?"

"Yessuh. Heah they is." Lopey handed over a bunch of keys strung on a black ribbon. "You want me to go oveh the house with you?"

"No. Tell Perseus I want him to go to the village for me; he's to take the back road and not to answer a single question from anybody. Tell him to go straight to the hardware store and bring Eddie Lippisch back with him, that I want a lot of trunks opened, some of them maybe with foreign locks, so Eddie better bring all the tools he can carry. Perseus can drive a car can't he?"

Lopey looked dubious.

"Thinks he kin, Doctuh, but me, I wouldn't ride behime him!"

"Tell him to take my car, anyway; I'll chance his wrecking it! Then send Cesare in here to us."

When Lopey had departed on her errand Peterby asked:

"Thinking of Cesare's friend Tony, Doc, the one who uses scent?"

"Yes, but I'm thinking more of those trunks upstairs," the doctor replied. "I think I know something, but I want to be dead certain of it before I telephone to our friend Mitchell."

CHAPTER VIII

THE STEEL TRUNK

CESARE had, for the past year, been a familiar figure to both the doctor and his new deputy as he drove Mrs. Leigh's smart sedan about the Edenvale roads. He was an olive-skinned, good-looking, young man with bright, black eyes and rather full red lips and now, as he presented himself before them in the library to which they had betaken themselves, he was as immaculate and self-possessed as if summoned by his late employer herself.

"You sent for me, sir?" He spoke with no accent, and only a slight hint of the Latin in his soft, rolling tones.

"Yes, Cesare. How long have you been chauffeur for Mrs. Leigh?"

"Chauffeur? Two years, sir. Before that I was courier in Italy, what you'd call a manager for traveling families, mostly Americans," Cesare replied glibly, as if the questions had been anticipated.

"Where did Mrs. Leigh engage you?"

"In Paris. I'd been taking a party through Switzerland and stayed with them till they sailed for home."

"There must have been money in it," the doctor remarked in a tone of friendly interest. "More than a chauffeur's job. Why did you change?"

"Money, sure, but I wanted to get over here."

Cesare smiled with a flash of his white teeth. "A guy gets sick of traveling all the time, and likes to work steady for the same party, if they're all right. Mrs. Leigh was fine, never a kick about garage bills or anything, and no long hours. I won't get another place like this in a hurry!"

"You accompanied Mrs. Leigh to America? When?"

"In May of last year—seventeen months ago, now."

"Who was in her party? Did she cross with friends or any members of her family?" The doctor was evidently choosing his words with care, but the chauffeur answered indifferently:

"There was just her maid, Louisette, and me. Mrs. Leigh didn't have any family that I know of."

"You never heard of—Mr. Leigh, then?"

Cesare's smile was broader.

"No, sir. Mrs. Leigh was alone when I came to her, and nobody said anything about the husband."

"She wasn't in mourning?"

"Widow's you mean? No, sir. Mrs. Leigh wore black a lot, but not mourning."

"Where is the maid Louisette now?"

"She didn't like it here in America—went back to Paris after a month or so."

"Did Mrs. Leigh get another maid?"

Peterby was watching the doctor, wondering at his line of questioning, and Cesare appeared frankly bored by it.

"I don't know—didn't hear of one. I lived in a boarding-house, near the garage where we kept the

car after we landed in New York, and Mrs. Leigh at the St. Boniface. Sometimes she 'phoned for me herself and sometimes a clerk. She didn't go out very much till late in the summer, when I took her out of town looking at places, and then she found this."

"Do you know Mr. Mitchell?"

"The lawyer? I've driven Mrs. Leigh in to his office half a dozen times from here—Four-ninety Broad. I never saw him, though."

"Did you ever see Mr. Montford Lutrelle?"

"Not till yesterday—Perseus told me his name. He sure drives a wicked wheel!" Cesare laughed, and then, as if swiftly realizing its unseemliness at such a time, his face sobered. "First time he ever called, sir!"

"We've got to have a report on every one who has been here, though, merely as a matter of form. Tell me what you can of your own friends who visited you here."

"I can tell you all about 'em, Doctor." Cesare spoke eagerly now. "Alfio Salerno is my cousin—same last name—and he's a chauffeur, too, for the Marquis Belletini, who's over here selling a lot of his property and art collection. Luigi D'Annibale has a fruit store on Sixth Avenue, and Tony Mastiorocca is what you'd call a commission man and interpreter; lot of wops come over with money to start in business, but they can't speak the language and get stung. Tony rents places for 'em, buys their stock and trucks if they need 'em, and keeps 'em out of the hands of the easy-money boys—all on a percentage for commission.

He's got an office down on Mulberry Street where you can always find him, and Alfio's boss is at the Vanderpool. They're all straight guys."

The sound of an erratically driven motor coming up the private road stopped with a whining screech at the side door, and the doctor said:

"All right, Cesare. That's all I wanted to know. Keep yourself in readiness to go to the station when any of Mrs. Leigh's friends or relatives arrive."

Cesare nodded and went back to the garage, and Peterby turned to his companion.

"There's something funny about that fellow, Doc. He's too flip, too wise to be contented so long in a quiet country place with no extra tips and practically nothing to do. If it was me—"

He stopped and the doctor finished for him.

"You'd look him up? I'm going to, and his friends besides. He had his answers all ready—too ready. Why should he have to rehearse them if he wasn't going to keep back something? I had a feeling that he was telling me just what he wanted to and no more. Then, though he said Mrs. Leigh was such an employer as he would not be able to find again, he didn't appear at all downcast or shocked at her death or the manner of it, did you notice? I'm going to ask you to run in to town in a day or two, Cornelius, and see this Tony in Mulberry Street; if you get a whiff of the same perfume you smelt last night— Oh, Hello, Eddie! Want you to open some trunks for me up in the garret."

Eddie Lippisch, the village locksmith, was a long,

gangling youth with watery eyes and a shock of tow-colored hair. He had appeared in the library doorway with a heavy leather satchel strapped under one arm, and he gazed about him in shrinking awe, as if expecting to see the body of Mrs. Leigh confronting him.

He turned obediently and followed the doctor up the hall stairs, and Peterby brought up the rear, averting his eyes from the opened doors they passed. The house to him seemed still full of the living presence of its mistress, and he felt that at any moment her clear, exquisitely modulated voice might call out to them. Who was the big, deep-voiced man who had been on the terrace with her late the night before, and why had Montford Lutrelle called in the afternoon? What could she have in common with the gay young scoundrel whose affairs had occasioned unsavoury notoriety for almost a decade, and what business interest had made her call in the services of Lang & Longstreet?

He followed up a second flight of stairs and a third, narrower one, at the rear. Here the doctor unlocked a door leading into a huge, dim attic that covered all the main part of the house, its roof sloping sharply in all four directions from the center. Trunks and boxes stood about, but in orderly rows that made them easy of access, and only a slight veiling of dust covered them. Some were plainly marked: "linen," "blankets," "curtains," "draperies." To these and several other trunks Eddie Lippisch readily fitted keys, but when he came to the last three his task was more difficult, and

he turned at length to the doctor, who was standing a little apart with Peterby.

"It iss no goot, Doctor. You want I bu'st dem?"

"Not so that they can't be repaired, Eddie. Can't you unscrew the locks entirely and take them down to your father's store?" the doctor suggested. "You ought to be able to make keys to fit them in your little shop."

"To dese two, maybe." Eddie indicated a huge, flat trunk and a small, square one. "Dat feller over dere iss of steel, like a safe yet; him I got to drill around—takes me an hour."

"Go ahead!" The doctor nodded. "I guess that's the one we want opened most of all."

For the best part of an hour Eddie toiled, but finally the lid of the last trunk was raised, and he gathered up his tools and departed. Dr. Oakes and Peterby in the meantime had cursorily examined the unlocked receptacles, to find their contents merely an orderly collection of household goods and clothing; and now Peterby stood looking at the three which had defied the youthful smith's keys.

"Which shall we tackle next?" he asked.

"The steel one, I think." The doctor advanced toward it. "You don't usually find a strongbox like that in a person's home, especially when they have a safe, besides. They'd only keep the most private things in it, where they'd be free from prying eyes, and that's what we're after."

"It seems almost like—like—" The words choked Peterby.

"Like opening a grave?" the doctor asked. "So it is, but we've got to find out the truth. I thought so; papers! Here, take a bundle of them, Cornelius, and sort them."

Peterby obeyed, spreading them out on the top of the great flat trunk, and for a time nothing was heard but a continuous rustling. Then the doctor uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Great guns! Who are Lang & Longstreet, anyway? I meant to ask you."

"They are financial Paul Prys," Peterby replied slowly. "I was wondering what business Mrs. Leigh had to do with them. They get not only your general rating, taxes, assessments, and all that, but they look up your personal property down to household goods, art stuff, motor cars, jewelry—everything that could be converted into cash. They're uncannily accurate; if they tried, I believe they could find out what I was worth down to almost a dollar!"

"It looks as if they had." The doctor's tone was dry, and Peterby jumped to his feet.

"What-t!"

"Here you are." His companion held out a long sheet of paper from which he had stripped the pale blue cover. "Stocks, bonds, first and second mortgages, together with a presumable expert opinion as to their soundness or depreciation, four parcels of city real estate, the Peterby Building in Newark, the bungalow here—"

"Me! Why? What!" Peterby grabbed the paper and studied it with protruding eyes. Then it slowly

fluttered to the floor, and for a long moment he and his friend gazed at each other. "What on earth do you suppose it means?"

The doctor cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Evidently that Mrs. Leigh took a neighborly interest in you, Cornelius. She wanted to know how much you were worth, and she cared enough about it to pay for the information. What's the date?"

Peterby retrieved the paper, and when he straightened his face was purple.

" 'August third,' " he read. "That's—that's about the time Lang & Longstreet started telephoning to Mrs. Leigh again, according to that girl you called 'Lopey.' Doc, I can't believe it! It looks—it looks—"

"They started telephoning *again!*" The doctor turned to the mass of papers before him and strewed them out. "Of course they did! And about six or seven months ago Mrs. Leigh was having somebody else looked up! But who?"

He had come upon another blue-covered document, and now he stared wordlessly at it, but Peterby started forward.

"Who is it?" he demanded. "Who did she want the dope on first? Tell me!"

"On—Bill—Gresham!" It was the doctor's turn to look stunned.

"But—but what for?" sputtered Peterby, unconsciously betraying his own thoughts. "She couldn't have had designs on him; he's married! Why should she care how much he had? She wasn't acting as capper for any stock scheme, either, for she never put up

a proposition to me, or even mentioned business. What was the game?"

"I don't know, Cornelius." Dr. Oakes shook his head, but there was a note of shocked reserve in his voice. "Let's put these aside for the time being. Perhaps Mitchell the lawyer will enlighten us, there are several of his letters here, with his 'phone number engraved under the address that Cesare told us. I'll get in touch with him when we go downstairs, but we'll sift these papers thoroughly first."

"I'll tell the suffering world we will!" Peterby declared with emphasis. "There may be something that'll take the curse off those reports you found, and if there are I'd like to see 'em, but I'm not banking on it! What's in those letters of Mitchell's?"

"Business. Look at them yourself." The doctor held them out. "They're all relative to the sale of small parcels of stock and railroad bonds, some of them only amounting to a few hundred dollars, others to a thousand or more. They're acknowledgments of her letters, with a lot of horse sense about not selling, and later reports of their sale and mentioning enclosure of checks. It looks as if Mrs. Leigh had converted twenty or thirty thousand dollars' worth of small securities into cash in the last year."

"To reinvest?" Peterby had made no move to touch the letters.

"Nothing is said about that here."

"I see." He bent once more over the papers he had been examining. "You haven't given me much in this lot but clippings from foreign newspapers,

French and Italian, and I can't read a word of 'em. Playbills, too, theater programs from abroad, and a lot of loose letters. What's the reason they're none of them in envelopes, I wonder? The writing is queer and spidery, and they're all in different languages, too. They won't help much unless you call in an interpreter."

He was talking fast, obviously with an effort to pass over as quickly as possible the episode of the financial reports and the attorney's letters; but now silence fell again between the two, and they worked mechanically. Peterby flushed and paled by turns, and the doctor's gravity had deepened to sternness, while the attic windows gradually darkened as a cloudbank crept up, obscuring the sun.

"I've got some foreign letters, too," the doctor remarked at last. "None of them seem to be formal. At least they don't start with her name, only the first part of it, 'Alma,' with a word or two before or after it that may be more or less familiar and complimentary; I'll copy a few of them down and find out. No need of these falling into the hands of anybody but her legitimate heirs, if she has any, unless she's left instructions about them in her will."

"Provided she made one," Peterby supplemented. "I haven't come across it yet, have you? Look, here's a photograph of her in fancy dress—some masquerade ball, I suppose. A remarkable-looking woman, Doc, you've got to admit that."

He extended the cabinet photograph, but the warmth of admiration had wholly departed from his tone, and it was dry and almost hard. Dr. Oakes glanced at the

classically lovely features, the small regal head framed in two long light braids, and the simple quaint bodice which showed about the upper body, and then laid the picture aside.

"Clothes make a lot of difference in a woman," he observed. "Guess Mrs. Leigh had a wig on there, too; it looks lighter. Funny what truck they store away, isn't it?"

Peterby did not reply for a minute, and then he uttered an odd choking sound which made his companion look up quickly.

"What is it, Cornelius?" There was a note of sudden expectancy in his tone. "What are you looking at? So you found it first?"

But Peterby was not heeding. He stared at a half-sheet of newspaper which he held in trembling hands, and when he lowered it the doctor saw in its center a reproduction of the photograph he had just laid aside.

"Doctor, what was the name of that girl we heard sing last night—the one on the phonograph record, do you remember?" Peterby asked hoarsely. "Rosalie told us about her—famous prima donna, lost her voice! Was it anything like 'D'Almalli'?"

"Yes," the doctor replied quietly, but his eyes kindled. "That was the name. Why?"

"Because"—Peterby drew a rasping breath—"she —Mrs. Leigh—was D'Almalli herself!"

CHAPTER IX

PETERBY GOES ON A MISSION

THERE was a pause after Cornelius Peterby made his announcement and then he, too, looked up to find the doctor's eyes fixed quizzically upon him.

"You don't believe it—think I'm crazy?" He thrust the paper out. "Look at that! It's the same photograph!"

"I don't need to look at it." The doctor smiled. "Do you remember I told you, when you drove me home from Rose Acre to my house last night, that I'd made a discovery? I said Mrs. Leigh had my sympathy, and I was surprised you hadn't realized the truth. I recognized her speaking voice in those clear, bell-like tones of the singing one on the phonograph, and when I glanced at her in amazement I saw that she was leaning against the side of the window leading out on the balcony, with her head bowed as if she were overcome. So she was, Cornelius—memories of past greatness! She went out on the balcony for a few moments to recover herself, if you recall it, and then came back to plead a headache and go home."

"Great heavens! I'm beginning to see, and yet—" Peterby clapped one plump hand to his forehead. "D'Almalli—Alma Leigh—of course! Why didn't I get it, I wonder, or any of the rest of us? But I talked

about it, like a blundering fool! I brought the subject up again while I was walking across the lawn with her—said how wonderful that voice was, and uncanny to hear it now that it was gone forever, and she responded in the most cold, unfeeling way about it."

"Not to let you see, and guess the truth," the doctor explained. "It must have been a pretty severe shock to her to hear her own voice back from the dead again!"

"But why did she want to hide it? There's no disgrace—pride, I suppose. She couldn't stand it to have people pity her; the hurt had been too deep. So she was famous—an opera singer!" Peterby sat down heavily on the trunk. "Good Lord!"

"Yes. I told Miss Parrish this morning, when she was curious about Mrs. Leigh's past, that she'd find the lady wasn't exactly a nobody, but I didn't want to say anything more then, until I had proof of her identity. I knew that would come soon enough. It gives us a little start on Creech and the sheriff, Cornelius."

"You bet it does!" Peterby responded with inelegant fervor. He had rallied from repeated shocks that day, and as his astonishment at this latest discovery subsided, his practical mind reasserted itself. "Don't tell them yet, Doc! When you call up Mitchell, see that he doesn't blab to the press, either. Tell him you're sending a deputy into town—or why don't you go yourself?"

"Can't. I don't want to leave this spot; but I'll have him come out here to me at once. I can send for the back files of some papers, but there isn't any

other way I can get information about a world-renowned opera singer."

The doctor's tones were wistful, and Peterby exclaimed:

"I can! I never had much of an ear for music, but I know a couple of bankers who are bugs about it, stock-holders in the Cosmopolitan Opera. What I don't get from them I'll find out from Montford Lutrelle himself!"

"The fellow who called on her here yesterday?" The doctor looked his surprise. "Do you know him?"

"Of course! Didn't I tell you he played the market?" Peterby retorted. "People have rather fought shy of him since his divorce, and he's taken the hint and resigned from one or two of the more conservative clubs he belonged to; but I guess I can find him. Gad, how dark it's getting! It can't be as late as it looks. I can catch the next train, Doc, if you say the word."

"I do say it!" the doctor exclaimed. "Great Guns! I didn't know when I made you my deputy, Cornelius, that you could do as much as this."

Peterby had glanced at his watch, and now he replaced it in his pocket and began hurriedly to gather up the scattered papers.

"I haven't done anything yet, but I'm going to try," he declared. "It isn't quite five o'clock yet; if I can make the five-twenty-seven, it will land me in town in time to catch the first man I want to see, anyway. All right if I ask Cesare to drive me down to the station? My own car is parked in front of your door."

"Of course. I'll look into the rest of these papers later, while I'm waiting for Mitchell." The doctor slammed the trunk-lid and started for the staircase door, but Peterby seized his arm as a fresh revelation swept over him.

"Cesare! He knows who she is!"

"Certainly. That's why I asked him a lot of unnecessary questions awhile ago." The doctor smiled. "I wanted time to study him and make sure. He knows what's bound to come out now, and he's waiting for it; mind you don't give him a hint that we've found out the truth about her ourselves. The murder of a plain lady with simple tastes who loves the country is one thing, mysterious enough in all conscience; but when she's been celebrated the world over as a public character it's a pretty different matter. I'll be right here all evening and then home if you want to get in touch with me."

"I'll 'phone, sure," Peterby promised as they went down the stairs. "The minute I get a line on anything you'll hear from me, but I'm going to be mighty careful what I say over the wire; I know all three of the girls who run the Central board here, and if Creech hasn't bought 'em over with a package of gum, you can bet some of the reporters from town will be giving them a play! Anything else you want me to do for you in town, Doc?"

"No. If you can get the information about the past that we want, especially on any enemies there may be, it will be a big step on the way."

Cesare brought the sedan quickly to the door, and

in another moment Peterby had taken leave of the doctor and was rolling down the drive so smoothly that the car's speed was almost imperceptible until he glanced out at the hedge scudding past. Then they turned out into the road with a swoop that all but took his breath away, and as they flashed past the terrace steps Constable Matt Isley stared, and the apple he was munching fell from his hand to the path.

Peterby leaned back, glancing about him at the appointments of the smart little car with as much wonder as if he had never ridden in it before. The silver clock, and vanity case, and mirror, and vase, all bespoke the presence of its late owner more intimately and vividly even than the house had done, and in the delicate, subtle perfume that lingered on cushions and curtains he scented her hair as it had blown against his face last night.

A bitterly ironical smile curved his lips, and he brought his hand down heavily on his round knee. What a fat-headed old ass he had been! How she must have laughed at him in her sleeve! Of course she couldn't have liked him enough to listen to him, she who had probably been courted by rich young blackguards like Lutrelle and doddering old aristocrats of every crumbling country in Europe! She was turning her securities into cash, though, living on her capital; and from her attorney's disapproval of such a course she probably didn't have much of it left. Her voice was gone, her day was over, and she'd taken the trouble to find out how much wealth he had. He wasn't spending a quarter of his income, and he sup-

posed sixty-odd thousand a year would have been an inducement when she got her information two months ago. Two months! Why, it was then that she had begun to be so gracious to him, though he'd danced attendance on her since early winter! It was then she had begun inviting him to tea and occasionally to a little tête-à-tête dinner as well as to the larger affairs she gave for the whole set; and he'd been blithering idiot enough to think she was getting to know and like him better!

Lost in humiliation and self-disgust, Peterby reached the station before he realized it, to find the train just pulling out. Breathlessly he caught it, after a mere nod to Cesare, and sank down puffing on a seat in the smoker, to chew viciously on an unlighted cigar and resume his bitter reflections.

But Mrs. Leigh—or D'Almalli, or whatever her real name was—couldn't have been planning matrimony, for she'd had Gresham looked up too, and Gresham was married, even if he had made a fool of himself over her. But there was Lutrelle, and hadn't he heard somewhere that Lutrelle had forced his wife to give him his freedom? Gresham might have been capable of that, too; he hadn't much more decency! Hang it all, if Lutrelle had come out to see her the day before because he was crazy about her, why in the world hadn't she married him long ago?

The thought of Lutrelle brought his mind back to his errand, and for the remainder of the brief journey Peterby planned his program for the next few hours. Old Stewart MacPhail would be at the club till the

stroke of seven, if he were not at home nursing the gout, which was his sole heritage, save his amazing memory, of a happier era; Spencer Trevelyan must even now be in his austere bachelor apartment, preparing to dine on corn husks or hard chocolate, or whatever his latest fad was; and as for Lutrelle, ten to one he'd be found later at the newest semi-private gambling club in town.

Stewart MacPhail was in his accustomed seat at the club, and he looked up in amazement from beneath his bushy white eyebrows at the sight of a long-absent friend.

"Well, Cornelius, my lad, what brings you back to your old haunts?" He held out a shaky but cordial hand. "You pop up now and then like an exceedingly substantial ghost. But sit down. 'Tis a pity we can't celebrate as we should."

"It's celebration enough to see you, Mac!" Peterby responded as he seated himself and glanced about. "Looks quite deserted. Most of the old crowd prefer their own firesides, or cellar-sides, these days, eh? I've been in town on business for a day or two."

The last mendacious statement was added as a result of forethought, and MacPhail asked:

"When are you coming back for good? Doctors are all bosh; you look as fit as a fiddle! You're good for thirty years."

Peterby shook his head.

"I like my little place out in the country. Fine air, fine neighbors, and even if we do have our news a day late and our opera canned—say, Mac, you know I'm a

dub where real music is concerned, but I heard the most marvelous voice the other night on a record—"

"Record!" MacPhail snorted. "Invention of the devil!"

"All the same this was remarkable. Most glorious thing I ever listened to, and they say the girl lost her voice afterward at the very start of her career."

"Served her right, singing for that damned— Gad, man, you don't mean D'Almalli?" MacPhail sat forward peering at his companion in newly awakened interest, and Peterby's pulse leaped, but he nodded casually.

"That's who it was. Of course, you don't keep up with the latest singers nowadays, but—"

"Who says I don't?" MacPhail interrupted. "It happens that I heard D'Almalli myself when I was over taking the cure two years ago. It was just before her breakdown, and only Melba in her youth could have equaled her. Beauty, too; if I'd been a generation younger I'd have made a fool of myself over her like the rest. Eh, there were tales."

To Peterby's exasperation he halted, shaking his head, but a knowing smile creased more deeply the seams about his mouth.

"I was interested in the story I heard of her sudden collapse, but tell me more about her. Who was she?"

"American. That's all anybody seems to know about her origin; but there are a hundred versions of the launching of her career." MacPhail settled back comfortably in his chair. "The most likely one concerns Montie Lutrelle, though it's almost forgotten

now, even by the few who heard it whispered. By all accounts she was a cold, calculating little devil, and Montie was so unusually discreet that he must have been hard hit. The story went that she became his protégée and permitted him to finance her studies and spend thousands to influence the opera directors abroad to give her an early opening; but Montie was married, and she couldn't permit a breath of scandal. The old game, and Montie'd met his Waterloo. You know him?"

"Yes; it was about time," Peterby replied with elaborate indifference. "Still, he was divorced a couple of years ago."

"Rotten deal, but the D'Almalli had driven him crazy, just as she had others, I heard. His wife was a fine woman, and proud, and the Lord knows what infamous pressure he brought to bear on her, but she did finally divorce him for incompatibility. It was the last straw that put him beyond the pale—and then D'Almalli's voice failed!"

"And he quit cold? The low scoundrel!" Peterby growled.

"Not so sure. He's a changed man, and for the worse, hitting a swifter pace than ever; and though it may be remorse for his wife and the whole mess he's made of his life, it may still be D'Almalli. Fact of the matter is, the woman disappeared."

"That's odd." Peterby flicked the ash off his cigar and watched his hand carefully to see whether it was shaky from excitement. "Career gone, no future—why didn't she marry him?"

MacPhail shrugged.

"Perhaps she was out for bigger game, for she still had her beauty, you know, and she may have seen that Montie's sun had set, socially. He'd become a pariah, for all his money, and she was a has-been, a flash in the pan of the operatic world. It wouldn't have been a strong enough combination to win back. Anyway, she dropped out of sight as if she'd stepped off the end of the earth, and he's never been the same man since."

"When did she disappear?" asked Peterby. "Was it as spectacular as her breakdown?"

"On the contrary, it was so quietly done that no one realized it till she was so nearly forgotten it made no sensation. She dismissed her secretary, her maid, every one around her, and kept to her apartments while her manager and physicians gave out bulletins of her protracted illness as long as they were of interest, but if you knew Paris—flowers and prayers and an emotional mob storming the doors one day, and forgotten the next. A month later there was just a line in the papers to say that Mme. D'Almalli had gone to Biarritz to recuperate for the next opera season, but by that time every one knew the truth, that her voice was gone forever; and it aroused only a flicker of interest. It was months afterward when somebody thought to ask about her, and it came out that she hadn't gone to Biarritz at all. There was no trace of her from the day of her departure from her house; and there it ended, with just a few weird tales cropping up now and then of some eccentrically

chosen retreat of hers. I've heard that Montie moved heaven and earth to find her, but he didn't succeed."

"D'Almalli—it's not American, not her real name, of course," Peterby observed. "Does anybody know it? I hate an unfinished story. Perhaps some other admirer—"

"Nobody could ever learn her name, and as for her other admirers—well, there was Rheinhardt Kroll the impresario, but whether he was mad about the singer or the woman is a question. She'd already beggared the Marquis Belletini, and as for Emile Lemonnier and Lord Vereker—well, they consoled themselves. The story is an opera plot in itself, isn't it?"

"All of that! I'll never forget her voice, even reproduced." Peterby changed the topic and took his departure as soon as he could, with his thoughts whirling.

Belletini! The Italian nobleman who was here to sell his heirlooms, his property, who was stopping at the Vanderpool, and whose chauffeur was Cesare's cousin! Mrs. Leigh as D'Almalli had ruined him! What was the answer?

Would there be time to call up the doctor at Ivy Terrace and tell him to keep an eye on Cesare, as a link in the chain leading to a new possibility? Peterby chanced it and spent a futile twenty minutes in the nearest booth, for the number persistently refused to answer and at length he received the terse explanation: 'Out of order.'

Fuming, he betook himself to the antiquated bachelor apartment in the old-fashioned section of the city

to which Spencer Trevelyan still stubbornly clung. He found his surprised host struggling into a Tuxedo.

"Hello, Neely," the latter greeted him and then gestured toward the table, where the remains of a sort of meal reposed. "Sorry you didn't drop in earlier. I've discovered the greatest food of the age—the first age. Man's earliest, natural sustenance. It would make a new fellow of you."

"Looks as if you were keeping rabbits, Spence." Peterby wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Raw carrots and potatoes—"

"Proper food in its proper state! But sit down; I'll be right with you. Musicale on later at the Selways', but I've an hour to spare." Trevelyan started, and his gaunt, ascetic face flushed. "By Jove, I'd almost forgotten! Big sensation out your way today, wasn't there?"

"The murder, you mean?" Peterby replied carelessly. "I believe so, but I've been too busy to see the latest reports on it in the papers. I heard rumors of it before I reached the station this morning."

"But the woman was a neighbor of yours, you must have known her. What was she like, Neely—this Mrs. Leigh? There's some hint of a mystery about her, isn't there?"

"Not that I know of," Peterby maintained stoutly. "She lived very quietly. I've seen her driving around occasionally, but I never met her, and I haven't heard her discussed. I didn't even hear the details of the affair; but then I've got something else on my mind, and I came to you for a bit of advice."

"Ah!" Giving advice was the pet diversion of Spencer Trevelyan, as his guest well knew, and he smiled benevolently. "Go ahead, Neely; what can I help you with?"

"Well, it's a merger—all inside information, you understand—and it looks as if any one who went in deep now would clean up," Peterby improvised hastily. "Sound dope from every angle—except for the man himself who wants me to go into his proposition with him. He's been a pretty lucky plunger in his day, and I never heard a criticism of his integrity, but he's under a cloud in another way, and I've been out of the Wall Street game so long I'm gun-shy. There isn't a fellow whose opinion and discretion I'd have more faith in than yours, Spence, and though it's a delicate matter—"

He paused provocatively, and Trevelyan licked his thin lips.

"I understand, old man. Who put the proposition up to you?"

"Montford Lutrelle."

Trevelyan stared and then threw up his hands.

"Don't touch it with a ten-foot pole, Neely! He's on the rocks—broke!"

CHAPTER X

MONTFORD LUTRELLE SPEAKS

"LUTRELLE broke!" Peterby repeated. "Is that straight, Spence? I can't believe it! Why, a few years ago—"

"A few years ago he was all right, playing the market sanely and brilliantly with the millions he inherited, and although he was wild and threw his money around, he was sound as a dollar. That divorce cost him a fortune, though, and he spent another on D'Almalli's career that ended so dismally. Everything he's touched since has gone wrong, and in trying to bull his luck and recoup, he has plunged and lost steadily till he's at practically the end of his rope. I don't believe in kicking a fellow when he's down, even if he is a rotter, but you're in danger of being dragged under with him or I wouldn't have spoken. I don't care what his proposition is, Neely, steer clear of it!"

"Thanks. I shall." Peterby did not need to simulate wholly the shocked surprise in his tone. "I'm glad you told me frankly. Some one said he'd been hitting the gambling houses pretty constantly, and that made me a bit leery, too."

"He has. Hangs out at Doc Cramer's nearly every night; that's the newest one, a double apartment in the Chateauriche, up on the Drive, and anybody can get in who plays a stiff enough game." Trevelyan

shrugged. "Cramer will pick the bones, and then—"

"What became of the woman D'Almalli?" Peterby asked, dismissing Lutrelle with a gesture. "You know all about those songbirds. I've heard of her lost voice and supposed disappearance, but wasn't there a husband somewhere? Seems to me I heard his name, or read of him."

"If you did, it's more than the rest of the world has. She was a mystery always, but it's a deep regret to me that we had no opportunity to hear her at the Cosmopolitan before her voice failed."

"Too bad. But I won't keep you, Spence." Peterby rose. "Thanks for the tip on that deal; it's more than enough for me. Run out and see me some time; we've a fine little country club, and I'll give you all the vegetables in the raw that you can eat."

He took leave of the eccentric banker with one point cleared in his mind. If Mrs. Leigh had looked up Lutrelle's financial career during the past two years it was easy to see why she had not considered him as a matrimonial possibility, provided Trevelyan's data were correct, but Peterby made up his mind to discover that for himself.

It was still too early for his next call, but he found a quiet restaurant and dined heartily. Away from the immediate scene of the tragedy he could consider the various clues and motives with dispassionate judgment, but his meditations brought no light on the mystery itself.

That rustling and odor of strong perfume by the hedge, old Theron Bemis' account of the stranger on

the terrace with Mrs. Leigh, the fact that her chauffeur and that of the man who had beggared himself for her were relatives and close intimates, the strange weapon which had been used, the revelation of her character as disclosed by the examination of her private correspondence, her probable approaching bankruptcy,—which thread would lead to a solution? The stranger, Lutrelle, the Marquis Belletini—could one of the trio have struck that blow?

Peterby tried once more, unsuccessfully, to get Ivy Terrace on the wire, and then taxied uptown to the Chateauriche, a towering, pretentious apartment house overlooking the river. Here he ascended in a private elevator to the apartment occupied by "Doc" Cramer, where he presented his card and added a few diplomatic words which he had almost forgotten.

The footman bowed and left him in the small reception room, and as the door opened and closed he heard a click and a whirr and the subdued murmur of masculine voices. Evidently roulette was in vogue here as well as cards, and the game was starting in early.

Presently the door opened once more, and a tall gray-haired man entered smiling genially.

"Mr. Peterby? I'm Cramer."

"Friend of mine said it would be all right if I looked in on you without a sponsor." Peterby accepted the extended hand. "I haven't played in some time, but Reynaud or Hollis will vouch for me if you care to get in touch with them, and I understand that a friend of mine is here nearly every night—Montie Lutrelle."

"You're all right, Mr. Peterby; glad to see you any time. Mr. Lutrelle isn't here yet, but he may look in later." Doc Cramer threw open the door. "Kana, take the gentleman's coat."

A Filipino boy came forward, and Peterby passed with his host into the first of three rooms given over to roulette, stud, and faro, respectively. He played for an hour with varying luck until, glancing toward the doorway, he saw Montford Lutrelle standing there, swaying slightly and clinging to a portière for support. His face was the pasty white of a man far gone in liquor, his eyes dull and glassy; and when he lifted them he jerked his head up also, as if his powers of coördination had temporarily left him.

Peterby saw Cramer step forward and apparently expostulate with the newcomer, who shook his head stubbornly and made as if to thrust his host aside. Would Lutrelle recognize and remember him in his present condition? He decided to take a chance and advanced toward him with hand outstretched.

"Hello, Montie! It's a devil of an age since I saw you!"

Lutrelle stared for a moment, and then his dull eye lightened.

"If it isn't ole Peterby!" He thrust out his hand but missed that of the other by several inches until his was grasped and shaken. "Old Tubby Peterby! Thought you were rus-rusticating in the country! D——n the play! Le'ss have bottle wine in here'n celebrate!"

To Cramer's obvious relief he hauled Peterby into an alcove near the reception room and, slumping into a chair, buried his head in his arms on the table.

"Don't mind me, Peterby, old boy!" His voice, still with an almost pitifully boyish ring in it, came muffled and maudlin. "All right in a minute. Bit under the weather, and the way you spoke to me—don't see many of the old crowd any more—I mean they don't see me!"

"Well, *I'm* mighty glad to see you anyway, Montie," Peterby exclaimed hastily, in fear of further self-revelations. "How's the market these days?"

Lutrelle lifted his head and laughed, drawing the back of his hand across his loose lips.

"Rotten, thanks! They've got to me, Peterby, got to me at last! I'm not broke, though a lot of the crowd think I am, and I'm going to pull out while I've got enough left to play with till my luck changes. Going to pull out—cut the whole game—God!"

He had repeated himself wanderingly, but a spasm of mental anguish crossed his face, and the exclamation was wrung from him in a groan. What sudden thought that he had tried in vain to drown had risen again?

"That's sensible," Peterby said soothingly. "Lay off if you're getting a bad run of luck. I quit some time ago, except for an occasional flyer—I've been rusticating, as you said."

The Filipino appeared with a small bottle and two glasses, and when he had served them and gone Lutrelle observed:

"Thass good! Country—orchards and fields—thass the thing, old boy! I'm going far away—d——n far! Where's your place, anyway?"

He raised his glass waveringly and Peterby bent forward with a smile.

"You ought to know, Montie! You passed it yesterday!"

Lutrelle's fingers tightened spasmodically and he looked up, a flash of color staining his cheeks.

"What d'you mean? How the deuce do you know where I was yesterday?"

"I saw you—when you went to call on Mrs. Leigh."

The glass crashed to the floor, and Peterby thought for a moment that the other man was about to spring at his throat. Then the rage which had distorted his face passed as quickly as it came, and the color fading left a grayish pallor in its place.

"Look here, Peterby!" His voice had cleared and hardened. "I'll have to ask you what you're driving at!"

"I'd apologize—lady's name in a place like this—but we used to be pretty good friends down on the Street, Montie, and seeing you here tonight I thought you'd like to know—well, what's going on." He put as much significance as he could into his tone and the younger man rose suddenly.

"Come on, let's get out of here. The air—that's it—a good walk. I'm glad you spoke straight out from the shoulder. That's what I've been wanting, some one to talk to, and you were always a good sort."

"Fine! Let's go!" Peterby assented with alacrity, and rang for their coats and hats. It was evident that Lutrelle was making an effort to gather his wits together, for the shock of Peterby's veiled disclosure had already partially sobered him, and nothing more was said until they reached the street.

"Shall we cross and take a turn up along the park wall?" Peterby suggested then. "It'll rain later, but this strong wind is great!"

Lutrelle acquiesced in silence, but as they swung northward he asked:

"Where is your country place? You say you saw me yesterday?"

"At Edenvale, or about a mile out. You drove past in your roadster while I was working in the garden to train down, and I hailed you, but you didn't see me." He added the last with inward surprise at his own facility of tergiversation, but Lutrelle stammered as if still groping:

"How—how did you know where I was going?"

"Because you met a friend of mine on the road and asked to be directed to Ivy Terrace. You've seen the papers?"

"Of course! Great God—" Lutrelle broke off and stopped dead to stare at his companion. "Why, you —you were the man who took her home from the dinner party last night—the last of them all to see her! It's in the final edition, out an hour ago. Why in the world I didn't connect the name— When I read it first I couldn't believe—I thought I must be going mad! Then I—I took a few drinks and—and went to

pieces! Peterby, tell me I *am* going mad! Tell me it isn't true!"

The note of anguish in his appeal was unguarded, and Peterby laid his hand on his arm.

"I wish I could, Montie, but it's true, I'm afraid. Mrs. Leigh is dead—murdered!"

"Mrs. Leigh. . . . Yes, of course!" Lutrelle started to walk on again slowly, but his step had steadied and there was a note of cautious reserve in his tone. "Terrible thing, Peterby! To call on a lady, have tea with her, and then read the next day of her murder! Enough to give any one a shock!"

"I should say so." Peterby hesitated and then plunged. "A few of us know who she was, but it's all bound to come out in the papers in a day or two. The news that—D'Almalli has been found—"

"So, you know that, too, eh? Peterby, I'm beginning to see; and it's white of you to have done this! You didn't find me at Cramer's just now; you went there to look me up! Gad, I appreciate it after the cold shoulders I've had turned to me!"

"Eh?" ejaculated the astonished Peterby.

"You wanted to tip me off that I'd be dragged into this, and all the old rotten business raked up again. I don't much care! I've lost—thrown away—everything! Family, friends, position, money, even self-respect—I tell you, Peterby, if a man strips himself of these he hasn't much left to worry about!" Lutrelle laughed suddenly, horribly, and as quickly checked himself. "I'd like to know who killed her, though! If he stood here before me, I don't know whether I'd

want to shoot him down or shake hands with him!"

"Great heavens, Montie! Don't talk like that!" Peterby was horrified. "She was a woman, after all, and she's been foully done to death! I don't know any more of your story than others have told me from time to time, and I'm not asking, but I thought in common fairness I'd tell you—"

"I know, and I'll never forget it!" To his embarrassment Lutrelle wrung his hand. "I'd like to tell you—if you don't mind. God, but I've needed some one to talk it over with, some one who'd try to understand. My wife—I haven't any excuse. I was wrong almost from the start, but I've paid, and I'll keep on paying for the rest of my life, for I know now what I've lost! Alma—I'll try to be fair about her. I was insanely in love with her, and the more she held me off the more I idealized her, till nothing else mattered in all the world! She wanted a career—I gave it to her! She wanted marriage—I paved the way. I'm not blaming her, understand, Peterby, she only took what I gave, and if I thought she cared—well, many a man has fooled himself before this. You know what happened to her, that her voice failed?"

"Yes," Peterby replied in a smothered tone. "She disappeared after a few months, didn't she?"

"She ran away, even from me! At first she wouldn't see me after that opera night in Paris that was her swansong; but later I called every day, and she was so sweet and gentle and resigned that I worshiped her more than ever! One evening—God, I'll never forget it!—I spoke of the future that was open to us at

last, and—the next day she was gone! Peterby, I never saw her again till yesterday afternoon!"

"You tried to find her?" Peterby asked after a pause, while they tramped on mechanically against the driving wind.

"I tried everything that was humanly possible, but D'Almalli had vanished. I kept up the search for months and then came home in despair, but still caring. Do you know what I thought, what I was fool enough to make myself believe? That she had run away because she was afraid I had only wanted the great D'Almalli for my wife, and that when her voice failed I wouldn't break with her through pity! I thought she ran away in—in sacrifice, so that I would be free, that she didn't understand! It wasn't till yesterday I learned the truth."

He paused again and Peterby waited, for the other seemed now to be completely sober and master of himself, but the silence lengthened.

"How did you happen to find her again?" Peterby spoke at last, fearing that his confidential mood might change. He had learned so far only a repetition of what MacPhail had told him, and he wanted the facts about the previous day. "Did Mme. D'Almalli send for you?"

"Not she! I received an anonymous letter in the earliest morning mail, telling me where she lived and under what name, and I paced my room like a madman for hours. I didn't dare telephone or write for fear she would run away from me again. I wanted to approach her with tact, to assure her that I'd never

changed—Peterby, I know you'll think it's raw for a fellow to bare his soul like this; there's something that isn't quite decent about it, and yet if I don't I shall go mad. At last I couldn't stand it any longer, and I got out the car and drove like blazes to get to her."

"Well, she—she received you," Peterby prompted him.

"She told you?" demanded Lutrelle. Then before his question could be answered he shrugged. "Of course she didn't. I'm going to tell you exactly what I learned then, and the manner in which it was conveyed to me over a cup of tea. It was inexpressibly painful to the lady, but I had misunderstood all the way through. I was her very dear friend and she would always be grateful to me; she had looked on me as a patron of music who had faith in her genius, had thought that my affection for her was a foolish fancy that I would soon forget. She knew of course that I was uncongenially married, but was shocked when her own name was so cruelly brought into the scandal of my divorce—could never have thought of marrying me afterward, even if she had cared, for that would have lent color to the wicked suspicions of the general public, and she had disappeared as the kindest way to lead me to understand. Moreover, she had learned of my financial reverses with deepest regret, but I couldn't expect her to live in comparative poverty after the luxuries to which she had become accustomed, and it was quite my own fault that she had, since I had first showered them on her—in the interests of art, of course! She would always be honored by my

regard for her, but if I did truly love her now I would not be ungenerous enough to hold her to the repayment of a debt she had incurred not for herself but that she might give the world the benefit of her voice. She had been wrong to accept my aid, perhaps, and that was why her great gift had been taken from her, but though she had been an inexperienced young woman and I a man of the world she did not hold me to blame for influencing her, and she hoped I would always think of her as a dear friend. That was the situation exactly, Peterby."

"Good Lord!" The other spoke from the depths of his honest soul. "What an awakening! And that was all? You left, then?"

"Naturally. There was nothing more to be said, and I was dazed, stunned! I drove as if the fiends were after me for miles and miles, on roads I'd never seen before, that I hardly saw then. I had a flask in the car, and when that was finished I found places where I could get it refilled, and I drove on through twilight and moonlight till I finally came to my senses enough to ask at a service station where I was. It was Meadowbank and three o'clock in the morning!"

"Then you must have been going around in circles, for Meadowbank isn't more than fifty miles from Edenvale," Peterby observed. "Did you drive back to the city then?"

"Yes. Got in at dawn and walked the floor all day —you know, you saw the condition I was in an hour ago! When the afternoon papers came out and I saw that little paragraph of the—the murder of a 'Mrs.

Leigh' at Edenvale the night before I thought the poison I'd been drinking had affected my brain! I guess I did go a little off my head for a while, but I pulled myself together and went to Cramer's to try to forget. That's the whole story, Peterby, you've got it straight!"

"No wonder you thought you were going crazy!" Peterby paused in his turn and added: "Where did you ever meet her, anyway? What was her name?"

"D'Almalli. Later she admitted that her first name was 'Alma' and she had made the rest up, but she never would tell me who she really was beyond a rather moving story of having been brought up an orphan in the home of a very proud aunt in reduced circumstances. I met her five years ago at a studio tea given by a vagabond artist friend of mine, and the gentle, soulful simplicity of her, her unconsciousness of her own beauty—oh, you know, Peterby! You know how that sort of thing gets you!"

Peterby did know, and he asked hurriedly:

"That anonymous letter that told you where to find her—you didn't destroy it, did you?"

"No; I've got it here, somewhere." Lutrelle stopped under a street lamp, and fumbling in his pockets he produced a wallet from which he took a small envelope of thin onion-skin paper. "There! Want to see it?"

Peterby drew out the single sheet of paper it contained, and read:

" 'The D'Almalli, under the name of Mrs. Alma Leigh, is living at Ivy Terrace, Edenvale, Long

Island.' Montie, don't you see"—Peterby drew a deep breath—"you've got to find out who sent this to you!"

"I don't care!" Lutrelle shrugged again, but Peterby insisted:

"Yes, you do! It wasn't to bring you two together, but to get you out there—and you went too soon!"

"Too soon?" the other repeated blankly.

"You should have reached there after their work was done! Can't you understand? You had the motive, if they'd read the lady's attitude toward you more clearly than you did yourself, and they thought it would be convenient to have you on the scene of their contemplated crime. Montie, the man who wrote this letter to you killed D'Almalli!"

CHAPTER XI

SEVERED WIRES

THE rain was coming down in torrents at last, as Peterby rushed through the gates at the huge station just in time to swing aboard the one o'clock train. He was drenched and tired out, but he felt a tingling glow of excitement within him, greater than anything he had experienced during a near-panic on the market, and his brain was on fire.

He had known Montford Lutrelle as he had countless other younger operators on the Stock Exchange, in a casual but long-standing acquaintanceship which involved no social intimacy, and his opinion of the fellow had been negative. He had neither liked nor disliked him, and now, in spite of the disgrace into which Lutrelle had fallen through his ruthless treatment of his wife, he found himself sympathizing with him. He thoroughly deserved what he had gotten, but realization must have been bitter indeed.

As the train lurched on through the night from one local station to another Peterby sat staring at the raindrops racing down the darkened window and thought of the man whom he had just left at his rooms, shaking and despairing but sobered. How quickly sobriety had come! Quickly enough for him to be instantly on guard when Mrs. Leigh's name was mentioned and to check himself on the point of revealing her identity

until Peterby had disclosed his own knowledge of it. Could much of that intoxication have been assumed, at the first glimpse of him in Cramer's gambling rooms? Had Lutrelle been playing a part? He admitted reading of Peterby's having been the last to see the murdered woman alive—did he suspect the other's real motive in looking him up?

Then Peterby started in his seat with an exclamation which awakened a somnolent passenger across the aisle. That long, aimless drive of ten hours or more which had wound up at Meadowbank at three in the morning,—at Meadowbank not fifty miles away! Lutrelle did not know what roads he had taken nor remembered where he stopped; he had been fuddled with drink, almost in distraction as a result of his last interview with Mrs. Leigh—was it a likely story? Mrs. Leigh had been killed at approximately one o'clock in the morning; there would have been plenty of time for him to get to Meadowbank about three, and plenty of time later to frame this attempt at an alibi!

Peterby felt the gooseflesh rise upon him at the thought, and in swift revulsion he put it from him. Lutrelle had been rotten in his behavior toward his wife, his morals had always been of the lowest order, and he was reckless, ungoverned as to temper, but surely he would stop short of murder!

The man across the aisle was staring with an intensity of gaze that drew Peterby's eyes; and he saw a short, stocky, sallow man with a livid scar running from nose to ear, and a bluish ring showing between his dirty collar and his oily, close-cropped black hair.

An ugly-looking customer, in spite of his otherwise neat attire. What was he doing on a late train out into the country?

While he wondered they drew into the Edenvale station, and the unprepossessing stranger made no move to rise as Peterby went down the aisle, but when he alighted he saw him getting down from the other end of the car. He slouched off and was lost in a moment in the driving sheets of rain, and, dismissing him from his thoughts, Peterby turned up his collar, hunched his shoulders against the downpour, and started for Dr. Oakes' cottage.

It was in darkness save for a low light that glowed from behind the shutters of the office window in the little single-storied wing at the side, but as he clicked the gate the door opened and a broad beam streamed out.

"That you, Cornelius?" the doctor's voice called. "Mr. Mitchell is here, and we've been waiting for you."

Peterby understood the covert warning and hastened his steps.

"Hello, Doc!" he called, but in a subdued voice. "Didn't know whether you would be up so late, but I thought I'd take a chance."

Had Mrs. Leigh's body been removed? He grasped the doctor's hand and then stepped over the threshold with an inward qualm, but the little office was in its accustomed order, and before the case of medical books against the farther wall a stranger was standing.

He was a stout, elderly man with a plain, rugged,

iron-jawed face and shrewd gray eyes, and Peterby had a sense of being coolly appraised, as they were introduced, that aroused his latent antagonism.

"Horrible affair, Mr. Peterby!" Mitchell spoke in a quick, almost irascible tone. "My client was a charming woman, erratic and difficult to handle at times, but charming. I was greatly shocked to learn of her death and the frightful way it occurred."

"We all were, Mr. Mitchell," Peterby responded. "The coroner hopes, I think, that you will be able to shed some light upon it. You naturally know more of her intimate affairs than any one else."

"Her financial affairs," the attorney corrected hastily as the three seated themselves. "I understand that you have interested yourself in the case as—ahah!—an official pro tem, and that is why I waited for you. You have made discoveries in town?"

"Nothing of importance," Peterby asserted with firmness. "Just a little general information on financial matters."

"Hers?" Mitchell asked. "I could have given you that. Unfortunately they are in a very bad way, due chiefly to her lack of management and extravagance. When Mrs. Leigh's voice failed her income, of course, ceased, and she has since been living on her capital as if it were mere interest. When she returned to America, I advised her to go to the country and retrench sharply, since she was utterly incapable of earning even the most modest living. She knew nothing except music and had not the patience to teach—but I had something very different in mind than Ivy Terrace. A

small village home, something that could be run on a hundred a month. I suppose that was too much to expect of a woman who for a few years had known every luxury."

"For a few years?" Peterby repeated.

"Yes. When Madame D'Almalli first came to me for legal advice four years ago—it was on the eve of her departure for study in Europe, and she wished me to find a flaw for her in a contract which bound her here for a series of concerts—she was living as—ahah!—befitted a prima donna, but I understood that as a girl her surroundings had been quite modest. I have explained this to Dr. Oakes."

"Have you told him her name—her real name, that is?"

"Her legal name is Alma D'Almalli, I have reason to believe," the attorney responded cautiously. "She informed me that she had had it changed by process of law but declined to say what it had been formerly, or what court had granted her application."

"She was married?" Peterby pursued.

"I have no reason to think so." Mitchell shook his head. "I presume my client felt that 'Mrs.' was more dignified than 'Miss' when she retired to private life. I never heard her mention a husband."

"Don't you know anything about her antecedents?" There was a note of polite incredulity in Peterby's tone, and the attorney's jaw thrust itself out.

"Nothing whatever. It was not my province to inquire. Madame D'Almalli said at one time when I

urged her to have a will drawn up for her that she had not a relative in the world."

"Then she didn't leave any will?" Peterby glanced at the doctor.

"Not to my knowledge. This was before her departure for Europe."

"You must have an idea, however, of the value of her estate?"

"Yes. I have given Dr. Oakes an approximate list. At the present—or just past—rate of her expenditure, she would in three years have been reduced to actual penury. Madame D'Almalli's jewels were her principal asset, and she would have reserved many of them till the last—she had a passion for them. That is what will give us the greatest trouble in settling her estate."

Mitchell paused, and Peterby leaned forward.

"Why?"

"Because we have not been able to locate them today." The attorney in turn glanced at Dr. Oakes, who nodded.

"Yes, Cornelius. Mrs. Leigh kept a few larger pieces of great value in a vault in the city—a string of pearls, diamond necklace, crown and pendant, and an emerald brooch—but the rest in the wall safe at Ivy Terrace. Mr. Mitchell had the combination and opened it for me this evening; it was empty! Except for the jewels she wore at the time of her death, everything has disappeared!"

"I should hardly say disappeared," the attorney

amended. "Madame D'Almalli may have disposed of them recently without my knowledge, although I will admit that is a mere possibility, a remote one. I have suggested such a course to her more than once, rather than the sale of small securities that paid dividends, but she would not hear of it. As her attorney, I shall of course institute a quiet investigation at once to discover the whereabouts of these jewels. I can obtain a complete list from Steffani's; they attended to all the settings and repair work."

"Did the safe look as if it had been tampered with?" Peterby asked quickly.

"I could not say. I am not an expert. I should not think that it had been."

"It didn't." The doctor moved impatiently in his chair. "If any one else opened it, Cornelius, they must have had the combination. Roughly speaking, Mrs. Leigh had about a hundred-thirty-thousand dollars' worth of jewelry, fifteen-thousand invested in Ivy Terrace, the remaining twenty-five-thousand being carried on two mortgages, and forty-odd thousand in negotiable securities; a total estate of just under a hundred-ninety-thousand."

"And yet she would have been destitute in three years!" Peterby turned a dumbfounded face to the attorney. "She wasn't spending any sixty-odd thousand a year here—nearer ten or twelve!"

"She was spending it in other ways," the latter replied. "How, I am not prepared to say. I know that in the past year I have converted—under protest—over forty-thousand dollars' worth of securities into

cash for her. I mean actual cash—my own checks on which she obtained currency at the bank, in person."

"Good Lord!" Peterby stared. "Do you mean to say that you never even asked her what she was doing with it?"

"I did, on one occasion, but Madame D'Almalli so resented what was after all my unwarranted interference that I never repeated the indiscretion."

"Well, if you ask me," Peterby said grimly, "I'd say it was blackmail! Blackmail, and now robbery, on top of murder!"

"It is possible," the attorney admitted. "Mr. Peterby, I understand from Dr. Oakes that you were permitted a partial examination of Madame's private letters and other documents this afternoon—or rather, yesterday—in your official capacity. I wish to state, in regard to the Lang & Longstreet reports, that Madame asked me some seven or eight months ago how it would be possible to obtain authentic information on exactly how much a person was worth, in more comprehensive detail than any mere financial rating bureau would be able to compute. She mentioned no names, then or later, but I recommended the firm whose reports you have seen. I have not the least idea as to her motive."

"I have," Peterby retorted, reddening. "That's part of the general information I obtained in New York. Mrs. Leigh was farseeing."

Mr. Mitchell rose.

"I must be getting back to my hotel now, for it is almost morning, and I shall have much to do. Gen-

tlemen, may I ask that we work together? Any information I have or may be able to obtain will be at your disposal."

He bowed himself out, and the door had scarcely closed behind him when Peterby turned indignantly to Dr. Oakes.

"A fat lot of work we'll do with him! He acts as if he were on the witness stand, and his sympathies with the other side!"

"Civil lawyer, Cornelius; he doesn't want to be dragged into criminal work; but it looks as if he couldn't help himself. I waited at Ivy Terrace until after midnight hoping you would telephone."

"I tried twice, but at first nothing happened, and then Central said the wire was out of order. Did you have any trouble with it?"

"No, not when I called up Mitchell, half an hour after you left." The doctor frowned. "I haven't tried to use the telephone since. What news have you? Did you see your friends in town?"

Peterby repeated the gist of his three conversations, and his companion summed up:

"Two men—Belletini and Lutrelle—practically ruined, the first still to be investigated, the second with a poor alibi. Trevelyan says Lutrelle's broke, Lutrelle says he isn't. That, too, we can find out. Nobody knows who D'Almalli really was—umph! Lutrelle finds out where she is through an anonymous letter. I wish you had it!"

Peterby smiled and reached in his pocket.

"I have. I persuaded Montie to let me have it for

a few days, telling him it looked to me as if the murderer had sent it so as to get him out here just after the crime was committed and hang it on him. I promised to try to find out who wrote it, and that's strictly true: I think it would be a mighty good thing for us to know; don't you?"

Dr. Oakes took the thin, glazed envelope, removed the sheet of paper, and read the brief message before he replied.

"Yes; I guess it would. Oughtn't to be so hard, either; New Gideon isn't such a big place."

Peterby stared.

"The county seat! What's that got to do with it?"

"A lot." The doctor chuckled. "Neither you nor Lutrelle thought to look at the postmark, evidently. This was mailed at New Gideon at four-thirty Tuesday afternoon, October second."

He held out the envelope and Peterby grunted in disgust.

"Fine detective I'd make, Doc! Montie didn't care who wrote it or where it came from; from the minute he received it all he thought of was the message it contained. But me! I never even gave it a thought in the train coming home! You know every one in New Gideon down to the very dogs, don't you? Does the writing look familiar to you?"

"No. It's illiterate; and see where it starts and stops and starts again in both 'D'Almalli' and 'Leigh'? Looks as if they'd stopped to consider how to spell the names; doesn't it?"

"Heavens, I never knew you were a handwriting

expert, Doc!" Peterby laughed, and then at the sudden look of strained attention on his friend's face he added: "What is it?"

"Look at it yourself." The doctor thrust the note into his hands. "Do you see anything about it that would tell you one fact concerning the writer that we haven't even guessed at yet?"

Peterby studied it for a long minute and then shook his head slowly.

"It does look illiterate; kind of a scrawl, and yet not like a child's copybook attempts. Some of the letters are run together as if they were written in a hurry, but that's all I see."

"That's not a man's writing, Cornelius." There was quiet certainty in the doctor's tone. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, that message was sent to Lutrelle by a woman!"

"Good Lord, I believe you are right!" Peterby stared at the note once more and then looked up into the other man's eyes. "Could it be purposely scrawled to look like the work of an uneducated person? New Gideon is only twelve miles away; any one could motor over from here, or even walk if they didn't want this to pass through the Edenvale post office! Do you suppose any woman in the neighborhood knows Mrs. Leigh's identity and story, and had an object in bringing Montie Lutrelle to her again?"

"But what object?"—the doctor began and stopped, and for a moment there was silence between them. Then he shrugged.

"The writing looks different, stronger somehow, on

the envelope. As soon as the news does leak out that Mrs. Leigh was D'Almalli, I'll take this to a real expert in the city, and if a woman did write it, it will narrow the field of our search considerably, Cornelius. In the meantime, it won't do any harm to look up Belletini, and his chauffeur, and those other two friends of Cesare's, Tony and the man with the scar across his face—"

"The man with the scar!" Peterby clapped his hands to his head. "Why didn't I think? A man—a dark, tough-looking fellow—with a scar like that, rode down from town in the same car with me tonight, and got off here at Edenvale. I thought he was staring at me, too! If that's the one who runs a fruit store—Luigi D'Annibale—then he only keeps it as a blind, for a more thoroughgoing rascal I never saw! Why would he come down at this late hour to see Cesare?"

"We'll very soon find out!" Dr. Oakes strode over to the telephone. "I let the servants go back in the house as caretakers, with strict orders to Perseus to sleep beside the 'phone, and I'll send him out to the garage— Give me 142 Edenvale, please."

The sleepy operator replied, but no response was forthcoming from the other end of the wire, and after repeated efforts the doctor turned to Peterby with a very serious face.

"Something's wrong. This rainstorm isn't wild enough to have damaged the line, and I don't like the looks of things. I'm going to run out there in my car—no, you stay here and wait for me; you're soaked

through already. 'Phone your house while I'm gone if you like, and say you won't be home; I'll put you up with me."

"I'm a bachelor," Peterby reminded him with fine scorn. "It doesn't matter what time I get in."

The doctor took his mackintosh from the hall closet, and in a few minutes Peterby heard his little car chug off down the road. The house was so still that the swirl of wind and patter of rain from without made him drowsy in spite of himself, and soon he was nodding in his chair.

He awakened with a violent start to see that the hands of the old clock in the corner pointed to three, and to hear the shrill, insistent call of the telephone. Stumbling across the room to it, he lifted the receiver, and Dr. Oakes' voice came to him over the wire.

"That you, Cornelius? I'm 'phoning from the Greshams'. The wires have been cut over at Ivy Terrace, and Cesare is gone!"

CHAPTER XII

THE ODOR OF MUSK

AFTER the doctor's terse message Peterby paced the floor in newly risen excitement. Cesare and Mrs. Leigh's jewels gone! Was there a connection between the two facts and the third and greater one of the murder itself? There had been city-bound trains from Edenvale at eight and eleven; there would be no more until the milk-train at five. Had Cesare departed before the arrival of his friend Luigi?

It had been evident that Mrs. Leigh trusted her chauffeur implicitly and quite as evident from his manner, during the interview of the previous afternoon, that he knew who she really was. Moreover Peterby himself had remarked afterward that there was something odd about a man of his obvious type being willing to stay for so long in a quiet country place where there would be few extra tips, if any. But surely it had not been necessary to kill Mrs. Leigh on the terrace in order to obtain the jewels put away in the wall safe; and why had Cesare, supposing he was the thief, waited more than a year to turn the trick?

The waiting seemed interminable, but at length Peterby heard the doctor's car approach and stop at the gate, and he was standing on the porch when the latter plodded up the steps.

"It's true, Doc," he exclaimed, "the wires were actually cut?"

"Yes." The doctor shut the door and flung off his mackintosh. "Right under Matt Isley's eyes, too, or would have been if he hadn't gone into the kitchen for a piece of Julie Ann's pie. What time did you try to get me first from town?"

"It must have been about a quarter past seven."

"I thought so. She says she called him in and offered it to him at about seven. Cesare and Lon Corwin came in together for their dinner at half past—Perseus had already served me and was keeping something hot for Mitchell, who arrived at eight. We spent the evening going over the papers in the attic, after we had opened the wall safe, which we did immediately after he came. Remember, Cornelius, that I had turned everybody out of the house and locked it up when I took charge at the discovery of the murder, so those jewels must have been removed before six yesterday morning. I didn't admit the servants, even, until it was time to prepare dinner last night, and neither Cesare nor Lon entered before the time for their meal." The doctor turned and began to pace the floor in his turn, while Peterby perched on the arm of a chair and watched him. "Lon says they went back to the garage together and Cesare invited him into his own quarters for a smoke; he admits that the chauffeur had a bottle of what he describes as 'queer-tasting brandy' and gave him a drink, and he got sleepy and went to bed about nine. Perseus had a hard time waking him when I sent for him just now,

and I noticed that the pupils of his eyes were contracted and his tongue thick."

"You think he was drugged?" Peterby's own eyes were very round.

"I think it's likely, although when I searched Cesare's room in the garage the bottle was gone."

"How did he leave them—as if he'd make a complete getaway?"

"No." The doctor turned. "That's the odd part of it, he didn't even take a bag with him. Lon says the only things missing are the clothes he stood up in and a light raincoat and soft felt hat. He even left his bank book—the local one here—showing a deposit of over three-hundred dollars."

"Maybe he's gone off with the jewels and means to sneak back before morning," Peterby suggested. "I wonder if he was ever in Mrs. Leigh's room when she opened the safe, so that he would have an opportunity to get the combination?"

"Yes, he was." Dr. Oakes seated himself on the horsehair lounge and dropped his clasped hands between his angular knees. "Lopey remembers one occasion when Mrs. Leigh wasn't feeling well and sent Cesare to town on an errand for her. She asked for him to come up to her room. Lopey was right there all the time; but she couldn't understand where he was being sent nor what he was to do there, for they both spoke in Italian. Mrs. Leigh opened the safe and gave him a paper from it; and Lopey says he watched her all the time, 'like a cat watches a mousehole,' and that when he went away he was sort of smiling to

himself; but that may be just her imagination working overtime. Anyway, that was more than a month ago, and several other people have been in that room since, though Cesare himself hasn't—the local electric man to put in a base-plug, and a man from town to renew the weatherstrips at the windows, and another to measure for fresh upholstery. The weatherstrip fellow came Wednesday afternoon, while Mrs. Leigh was talking with Lutrelle in the drawing-room."

"Who let him in? Was he alone in the room at all?" Peterby questioned as fast as he could draw breath. "Did he look like an Italian? How long was he there?"

"Perseus admitted him; he says the man showed him an order card, but he can't remember the name of the firm, and Lopey says Mrs. Leigh knew he was coming. She forgot to tell us about him yesterday afternoon when we talked to her. He was there about half an hour, and although she swears she didn't leave him alone in the room for a minute"—the doctor smiled—"I think she was too much interested in Mrs. Leigh's caller not to have stolen downstairs to eavesdrop. She declares—and so does Perseus—that he was light, with yellow hair, and talks like Miss Parrish's gardener. I know Hans Branting—sewed up his hand for him when he gashed it with an asparagus knife—and he's as Swedish as his name. If Cesare shows up he won't get away from us again!"

"But suppose he doesn't?" Peterby rose. "Isn't there something we can do now?"

"Yes, and we will: go to bed!" Dr. Oakes got

wearily to his feet. "We have to be at work early, with clear heads, too, and I've got the sheriff on the job now looking for Cesare. He's wild about that cut telephone wire!"

Peterby lay awake long after the doctor's regular, quiet breathing in the great, old-fashioned bed beside him, showed that he slept. The changing scenes and crowding events of the day kept thronging his mental vision, but imprinted over all was the picture of that group on the terrace in the early morning—Dr. Oakes bending above the body of the woman with her hair sweeping down to the grassy level below and the sickening stain on her breast.

In the morning, however, much of the morbid horror had been dispelled, and he arose briskly in answer to Miss Charlotte's cheery call. The doctor was already up and out on an early sick call, but he returned in time to take his place at the breakfast table.

"Have any arrangements been made for the funeral?" Miss Charlotte asked.

"Yes; Mr. Mitchell has assumed charge of that," her brother replied. "It seems kind of like hurrying the poor woman into her grave, but today's Friday, and if he waits till Sunday the cemeteries will be peopled with visitors, and we want to have everything as quiet as possible; so there'll be just simple services at the undertaking parlors here tomorrow morning and interment over at Greendale."

Peterby understood. As 'Mrs. Leigh' the former opera singer was to be buried, before the disclosure of her identity created further notoriety.

The meal over, they repaired to the office, and Peterby demanded eagerly:

"What's the program for today, Doc?"

"The sheriff will be here any minute with a report on what he's doing to locate Cesare; he didn't come back of his own accord or we would have been notified. I put in an order from the Greshams' to have the wire at Ivy Terrace fixed at the earliest possible moment, and perhaps later you and I might go to town together. I wouldn't have stopped at the Greshams' at three in the morning, but I saw a light there in the library and remembered the 'phone was in that room, so I went up to the porch and knocked on the window. Mrs. Gresham let me in."

"Mrs. Gresham? What in the world was she doing up at that hour?" Peterby's eyes opened wide in surprise. "Was some one ill in the house?"

"Oh, no. She's been troubled with insomnia for some little time, and naturally the shock of the murder next door had affected her." The doctor lighted a cigar and passed one to his friend. "She'd come down stairs for a book to read, she told me. Rosalie had cried all day; she hadn't an idea the girl was so extraordinarily fond of Mrs. Leigh."

"I've been thinking," Peterby announced after a pause. "What if it were Rosalie who sent, or caused to have written, that note to Montie? If Mrs. Leigh had told of her identity, or the young girl had found it out in any way, it's just the sort of fool romantic thing she might have done to bring them together. Has that idea struck you?"

"No. Mrs. Leigh didn't tell her, we may be sure of that, and I don't see how she could have found it out. But when the truth is known to every one I'll sound her. Wait a minute, Sheriff!"

Anse Crofutt's long, lanky figure had mounted the porch steps, and the doctor hastened to admit him; for his face, through the rain-streaked window, was alive with excitement, and he waved a newspaper in one angular hand.

"Seen this?" he demanded before the door had closed behind him. "What do you know about that! Mrs. Leigh was a great opery singer, greatest in the world, I guess! What do you s'pose'll turn up next?"

He thrust the paper into Dr. Oakes' hands, and Peterby read it over his shoulder, although the merest glance would have been sufficient; for ribbon and banner alike across the front page bore the same message, couched in slightly differing terms, and photographs of D'Almalli in various rôles were spread over most of the space below. The secret was out.

"Hey, you can read all that afterward!" The sheriff shifted impatiently from one foot to the other, disappointed that his announcement had not produced its anticipated effect. "You're taking it mighty quiet, seems to me."

"We knew it before, Anse," the doctor responded. "At least, I did. I learned it while Mrs. Leigh was still alive, and I told Mr. Peterby yesterday. You've seen her lawyer, Mitchell?"

The sheriff nodded.

"I just left him at the hotel, and he's all put out

about it. Says he would have done anything to keep it from the reporters till the funeral was over, and he ain't got an idea who could have told 'em. You ought to have said something to me about it yesterday, Doc, and I'd have made it my business to see that that furrin chauffeur didn't get a chance to slip through our fingers."

"You had your own theory all set, Anse." The doctor smiled. "That lunatic from Aspendale—"

"He's been caught," the sheriff interrupted shortly, while a dull flush mounted in his lean cheeks. "Thirty miles east of Aspendale, he was, sound asleep in a fence corner, and they've checked up on every hour of his wanderings; he wasn't anywheres near Edenvale, but we got to look out for everything! That chauffeur running off like this and the jewelry gone puts a different light on the whole affair, with her being who she was; and Creech has chased over to New Gideon, busier than a bird-dog, to see the district attorney. They might go so far as to get detectives out from the city to help 'em, and it seems to me you and I ought to stick together more, Doc. 'Tain't a matter for the county seat, anyways till after the inquest!"

"All right," the doctor said readily. "Mr. Peterby's looked up some folks in town yesterday who knew about the opera singer, but not that she and the murdered woman are the same, and he didn't get anything more from them than what's in the paper here. He did see the young man who called on her Wednesday afternoon, though; we're quite sure it wasn't he."

"Maybe he told the reporters, all the same," suggested the sheriff.

Peterby shook his head.

"No, he'd have liked nothing better than to have had her identity remain unknown forever; for he'd divorced his wife in order to marry Mrs. Leigh, and then she turned him down. All that old scandal will be aired again in the afternoon papers now, so I'm free to talk about it. I don't think he could have been guilty of the murder, however; didn't you get a trace of Cesare?"

"Not a sign!" the sheriff declared despondently. "I've seen the freight agent and the night operator at the station; he didn't leave town by a train, going either way, after seven last night, nor send or receive any telegrams. There's no letter for him at the post-office, and he didn't get one since the first of the week. The car's still there in the garage at Ivy Terrace, and he didn't tamper with it—reckon he didn't think it would be worth while, with two more in the garage next door and three a little way along the road that could all have been borrowed to chase after him! I woke up Sim Attell and Ben Coleburn and three or four more, and deputized 'em to inquire along every road leading out of the village and at all the stations nearby, but the chances are Cesare just walked along the highway till he come to where somebody was waiting for him in a car and rode off. There wasn't any trace of his friend with the scar either, the one you thought come down with you on the train in the night, Peterby; if it was him, he must've gone away quick when he

found Cesare had flown the coop, and I'm not going to waste any more time at this end of the string."

"What do you mean, Anse?" the doctor asked quickly.

"I mean I'm going to get in touch myself with the New York police department and tell 'em to be on the lookout for the stolen jewelry, and to pick up that chauffeur for me if they can. Ain't going to have Creech get ahead of me on this, you can bet. If you're going up to Ivy Terrace again I'll see you there later."

The sheriff took himself off and the doctor turned troubled eyes on his companion.

"He'll do it," he prophesied. "Anse's as pig-headed as he can be, and of course he's sore about Cesare. Guess we'll have to work fast, Cornelius."

But Peterby scarcely heeded, for a sudden thought had come to him.

"Too bad you never found that jeweled waistcoat button I picked up on the terrace and handed to Mrs. Leigh," he remarked, apropos of nothing, and Dr. Oakes slapped his knee.

"Don't that beat all? Of course I found it, but I forgot to tell you." He walked over to the old-fashioned safe standing beside the bookcase. "It was down inside Mrs. Leigh's waist, where she must have dropped it after you gave it to her. Here it is."

Once more Peterby took into his hand the mother-of-pearl and platinum trinket and saw now in daylight that it contained an oval cabochon emerald, small but of a marvelously rich color.

"It's worth a lot," he commented. "You wouldn't call it exactly conservative; I don't believe even Montie would wear it, but cabochon emeralds are rare, particularly oval ones. I wonder if the man who dropped it on the terrace was the same one old Theron Bemis saw there later with her? Do you know what we ought to do? Advertise this in the New York papers as being found there in town, and see who calls for it!"

"Great!" the doctor exclaimed. "Who'll take charge of it there, though?"

Before Peterby could reply the front door bell rang violently, and as the doctor went to open it his companion peered out of the window. He could just see the rear portion of a huge vivid-green limousine, when the door opened and a deep booming voice sounded down the hall. The doctor replied, there came the thud of the closing door, and then two pairs of footsteps rustled on the matting-covered hall; the doctor's light, buoyant tread and a heavier, slower one.

Peterby advanced a step or two and then halted suddenly, his short nose lifted high in air and twitching with excitement. There had stolen to him, faintly but unmistakably and becoming more apparent each instant, the penetrating odor of musk!

CHAPTER XIII

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS

CORNELIUS PETERBY stood immovable as Dr. Oakes appeared ushering into his office a man so huge that his head all but touched the lintel and his massive shoulders completely filled the opening. He was impressive-looking and even handsome, in a bold, leonine fashion. The hair that stood up in a stiff brush from his great forehead was almost blue-black, and his eyes shone like gleaming bits of coal.

Peterby gave one swift glance at the doctor, and the latter sniffed suggestively. He too had noted the reek of scent and recalled the other's nocturnal encounter.

"Cornelius," he said with a slight wave of his hand, "this is Mr. Rheinhardt Kroll, an old friend of—Mrs. Leigh."

Rheinhardt Kroll! The impresario whom Stewart MacPhail had mentioned as being "mad about" D'Almalli! But whether it was the artist or the woman who had attracted him was a question. It was Kroll beyond a doubt who had lurked near the hedge on Wednesday night, however, for the distinctive scent gave him away beyond question. Had he indeed joined D'Almalli later, and what could have been the end of that interview?

"I am glad to meet the deputy of the coroner." Kroll bowed ceremoniously. "In the papers I read of the so-tragic death of my poor young friend, and I come at once in my car to render her the last service that is perhaps possible from me—to assume direction of her funeral."

"I believe her attorney has already arranged that, Mr. Kroll," Peterby murmured.

"Ar-rgh!" It was like the growl of an animal that issued from the thick column of his throat. "But it shall not be! The unforgettable D'Almalli rushed into an obscure grave? How dare he? She shall lie in state, as is fitting for a queen of song!"

He finished with a grandiloquent gesture, and Peterby had a vague impression of being one of a vast audience addressed, but it was shattered the next moment by the doctor's quiet voice.

"Perhaps you will be able to render Madame D'Almalli a greater service still, Mr. Kroll."

"In what way?" The impresario, who was preparing to seat himself, paused.

"By telling us of your last meeting with her."

"My last meeting?" Kroll raised his heavy brows. "In Paris?"

"No; here!" It was Peterby who interrupted unexpectedly, and he held out the waistcoat button. "This is yours, isn't it?"

The impresario stared at it for a moment without reply. Then he gazed straight at his questioner.

"Where have you found it?" he asked.

"On the terrace." Peterby paused and then re-

peated with growing assurance. "The terrace at Madame D'Almalli's home. You were in evening dress; you dropped it from your waistcoat while you waited there for her, before I escorted her back from Rose Acre."

"You?" Kroll fairly exploded the monosyllable.

"Yes. When I returned through the gate in the hedge I almost encountered you." The other's overbearing attitude was getting the best of Peterby's temper. "The scent you use made you as obvious as a searchlight could!"

"That is so!" The impresario showed a row of strong, yellow teeth in a smile that held nothing of mirth. "I had heard that a lady much resembling the vanished D'Almalli lived there, and in passing I was curious enough to stop. It is my deep regret that I did not wait—"

"You waited long enough to see and talk with her, Mr. Kroll," the doctor interrupted in his turn. "More than an hour and a half later you were with her on the terrace."

"Who is it that says so?" Kroll took a step forward.

"A neighbor, a reliable witness who can be produced at any time."

Kroll stared again and then threw up his hands in a dramatic wave.

"That too is true, gentlemen," he said. "Naturally, in view of the tragic event that must so shortly have followed my departure, I had not desired that my visit should be known. I learned just that day that

the D'Almalli had been discovered, and in the evening I motored out to see her. We are old, very good friends, you understand, and I had deplored always the untimely loss of her voice. I ask you to judge of my unbounded delight, then, when I drive past that house next door that is all alight, and I hear her singing, singing! There was no other voice like that in all the world—it has come back! I drive my car beyond Ivy Terrace into the shade of the trees and I rush back and up the steps to the level before the door. I do not ring, I will wait there and surprise her! Then I see the little white gate in the hedge and I think better I should wait there, that alone she will come!"

His speech had been growing more and more guttural, and now he paused, breathing heavily with emotion, a purplish flush rising in his cheeks.

"She does not come alone, however. I am waiting then many feet down the line of the hedge, and I retreat farther when I see Madame is escorted. I am not in the mood for introductions, banal pleasantries. Madame and the gentleman—you, Mr. Peterby—pass through and ascend to the upper terrace, and I wait again, on fire with plans for Madame's future. You return to the quiet house, and, as you have said, we all but encounter each other. I retire because I owe no explanations, I desire only to see Madame. When you have passed on I go to her. She is not surprised, she has been waiting. I think now she must have seen this waistcoat button. Is it so?"

"Yes," Peterby nodded. "I knew that she recognized it."

A smile of conscious pride lightened the heavy features.

"They are, one might almost say, an institution in the musical world! Kroll's emeralds! The stars of opera know them as my fetish.—Madame receives me coldly, she is not pleased that I, or any of the old life, seek her out; she denies that it was she who sang. I am annoyed, astounded at her attitude. I plead, command, storm! It is no use, and after more than an hour she confesses it is a phonograph record that I have heard—a reproduction of the voice that is forever gone. I do not believe! That I, Kroll, could be so deceived even at a distance—it is inconceivable! I have managed many singers, temperamental devil-children, to be treated only as naughty children; and I become violent.

"Madame dismisses me in great anger, and I return to the city. I am crushed at the break in our long friendship, the perversity of Madame in, as I think, willfully refusing to appear again; it is inexplicable! I do not despair; for they are changeable, these gifted ones; I have hopes still that I may win Madame over, but in the morning I have doubt—can Madame have spoken truly? I go to a shop where these records are sold and they play for me the song of Madame. I realize then that for the first time the ear of Kroll has failed him; it has been deceived! My dream for Madame is over!"

He struggled, spreading his huge hands, and then, seating himself, gazed from one to the other of his hearers.

"Mr. Kroll," Dr. Oakes slipped his own hands into his pockets and stood thinking, swaying back and forth. "What was the first you knew of the murder?"

"This morning, at a little after six, Flachaire, my new tenor, calls me up and tells me. He is all but incoherent, for he had appeared with Madame that opening night in Paris which for her was the end. He sees it in the earliest edition of the paper, and I am overwhelmed. How I compose myself I do not know, but I dress, I order my car, and I come at once to give my poor friend the last service that remains!"

"It remains to see that justice is done!" Peterby's eyes had hardened and grown very bright. "This isn't just a question of a ceremonial funeral and then forgetfulness, Mr. Kroll. You don't seem interested in the main point at issue now. A nicely staged requiem is all very well in its way, but it isn't going to blind the world to the fact that there's a murderer at large."

"So?" Kroll's stiff black hair seemed to bristle. "That, Mr. Peterby, is the province of Dr. Oakes and yourself and the other officials, is it not? I render my friend the only service in my power; the rest—it is not my affair!"

"Isn't it?" Peterby drew a quick breath. "You're an old friend of hers, and yet you don't care who killed her nor why, nor whether he's caught or not?"

"My associate naturally considers the fact of the crime as being of paramount importance just now." The doctor shot him a warning glance. "You forced your way through a gap in the hedge when he called

out to you at the gate, asking who you were and what you were doing there, didn't you?"

Kroll's brows contracted.

"I owed no explanation of my presence to Mr. Peterby! I give it now freely—what more do you ask?"

"A few questions, that's all." The doctor's tone was matter-of-fact but firm. "Mr. Peterby left Mrs. Leigh—as we knew her—at a quarter to ten, and you say you joined her immediately. You were seen with her on the upper terrace at half past eleven. For more than an hour and a half, then, you were arguing with her to return to the operatic stage?"

Kroll bowed impressively.

"It was more than an hour, certainly. I have said that."

"You said also that you pleaded, commanded, stormed at her; you became violent. How—violent, Mr. Kroll?"

"Sir-r!" The impresario sprang from his chair. "Do you dare to insinuate that I, Rheinhardt Kroll, have killed D'Almalli?"

"Certainly not!" Dr. Oakes brushed the question aside brusquely. "We've no time to consider personal feelings. You were the last person known to have been with her, you were seen in an attempt to take her in your arms, you admit a quarrel, she dismissed you—"

"Stop!" the other thundered. "That's a lie! I show Madame no—no tenderness! I am exasper-

ated, enraged at her willfulness, I take her by the shoulders and I shake her! It is then that she orders me from her house! She will have me thrown out by her servants like a stray dog—me, Kroll, who has made greater than she could ever have become. I laugh in her face and I go!"

"Precisely," the doctor nodded. "And what time was this?"

"I do not know! Perhaps midnight, perhaps a little later. If you are not imbecile enough to accuse me of this crime, of what interest are my movements to you?"

"None, except to fix the hour of her death. That took place, Mr. Kroll, not very much later than midnight."

The purplish flush paled, and a putty-like grayness spread over the visitor's face, as if for the first moment he realized the predicament in which his own statement had placed him; and great drops of perspiration gathered, trickling on his forehead, yet he smiled once more.

"That is unfortunate for me, you think, Doctor? I am—a suspect? I come here to you of my own accord, I tell you of my private, almost secret, call upon Madame D'Almalli, of our quarrel, that I lay hands upon her, that she order me to go, and we part in anger! Would I be so frank, so candid; would I have come at all if, in that anger, I have committed this crime? No one knew it was I, Kroll, who was here; no one would ever have known! I do not de-

fend myself; I ask only that you use the logic, the common sense, of which you Americans are so justly proud."

The irony of his tone was too much for Peterby's seething temper, and he sputtered: "I guess we can, all right. You came here today because you knew it would look mighty funny to that opera bunch if you didn't, and you tried to deny at first that you were at Ivy Terrace on Wednesday night, and then you started to say you hadn't waited to see and talk with Mrs. Leigh till you found out we had a witness! Do you call that frankness?"

The impresario drew himself up to his towering height and glared down at the rotund Peterby.

"You will find me, Rheinhardt Kroll, in my offices in the Cosmopolitan Opera Building or my rooms at the Hotel Fitz-Marlborough. I shall proceed with my plans for the funeral of my former protégée, Madame D'Almalli; and I wish you good-day!"

He included them both in a sweeping bow and turned to the door, but Dr. Oakes stepped forward.

"If, in spite of your disagreement, Mr. Kroll, you consider yourself a friend of the late Mrs. Leigh—or D'Almalli—you will surely not refuse to put your own personal resentment of our inquiry aside and help us to get at the truth. We must consider every possibility, and if you choose to invite suspicion by your reticence that is your prerogative."

"A thousand thunders!" ejaculated the impresario. "When I speak freely I receive the insolence of this boor, and when I—"

"'Boor'?" Peterby danced forward. "You overfed bully, I'll—"

"Cornelius!" The doctor caught him up sharply. "Mr. Kroll, I am sure, is beginning to see that it will be to his interest as well as in justice to Mrs. Leigh's memory that the real murderer be discovered. Let's forget personalities, as I remarked before, and see if Mr. Kroll can't help to get at the truth. Now then, you left Ivy Terrace at twelve or a few minutes later; did you notice any one lurking about?"

"I did not." Kroll's tone was suddenly mollified and gracious. "I was too much affronted, too incensed at Madame's attitude to note anything about me! I return to my car and start back to the city, but I miss the road and then I have trouble—my vacuum tank float leaks. There is a garage, though, at the village of Limebrook, and they make the repairs, but an hour it takes; I do not reach my hotel in town until between two and three o'clock. By then I have only forgotten my anger; I know that I can make my peace with Madame. It is my deep regret that I part from her so, for now it is too late. But certainly I wish the wretch shall be found and made to pay for this most vile crime. I am too overcome yet to think beyond the fact that Madame is dead!"

"I see." Dr. Oakes nodded again. "Mr. Kroll, you speak of Madame as your protégée. Was it you who launched her on her career?"

"No. She have already made her début at La Scala, but then I take her in hand. I secure her engagement at the Paris opera. I am negotiating to bring her

out here at the Cosmopolitan, when the voice is gone, ruined!"

"Your name has been mentioned as—er—an admirer of Madame," the doctor observed without compromise. "This is no time to blink facts, Mr. Kroll; it is the talk among opera patrons that you were 'mad about' her."

Kroll suddenly roared with laughter.

"I am mad about them all! I adore them! Capricious, rare children of the gift of song, we must make a little love to them, give them adulation, praise, as one would nurture an exotic flower, an orchid, to bring out its richest bloom! One takes nothing seriously about them, save that great gift, Doctor. Madame D'Almalli commanded my greatest admiration both as artiste and woman; and Madame looked upon me, I think, as a teacher, a guide, a sometimes tiresome and stern preceptor, but one who had at heart the development of her career."

"How long was Madame professionally under your management?"

"For more than a year—sixteen months; from her début till the end." Kroll's manner had become almost oily in its unctuousness.

"You knew her friends, her life?" the doctor pursued.

"Naturally; I saw Madame almost daily. She is popular, with many influential friends."

"You knew Mr. Montford Lutrelle? The Marquis Belletini?"

Kroll smiled at the first name but started slightly at the last, elevating his brows.

"Mr. Lutrelle was much interested in Madame's career; it was he who sought me out and persuaded me to hear her and lend her the benefit of my influence. The Marquis, I think, admired Madame greatly."

"He ruined himself for her, didn't he?" demanded the doctor bluntly as the latter paused.

Kroll shrugged again.

"That I could not say, Doctor. He was most generous, and later it was whispered that he had lost much, but there are always whispers. It does not do to inquire too closely into the mischievous tales one hears of all our great ones."

"Mr. Kroll, how did you learn where Madame was?"

The sharp black eyes narrowed, and a slow smile gathered again about his mouth.

"I have been waiting for this question. It is a mystery, beyond my knowledge! On Wednesday evening my secretary comes to me; some one desires to speak to me over the telephone. It is true they will not give their name. They say only that the message concerns D'Almalli. It is enough, I answer! A strange voice comes to me; it says only: 'D'Almalli is at Ivy Terrace, Edenvale, Long Island. Yellow brick house covered with vines, beyond small lake on New Gideon Turnpike.' Before I can reply, before I can ask further, the connection is broken."

"Was it a woman's voice, Mr. Kroll?" Peterby forgot his late animosity in the eager wish to have the question settled.

Kroll shook his head.

"No, Mr. Peterby. The voice was that of a man—an American."

CHAPTER XIV

THE OTHER WOMAN

WHEN Rheinhardt Kroll had taken his departure, asseverating his complete ignorance of any enemies who would have desired the death of his protégée, Peterby turned excitedly to his colleague.

"What do you think, Doc? That big brute thought her voice had come back; he wanted to exploit her, make a fortune out of her; and when she told him the truth he wouldn't believe, and abused her! He could have flung her down the terrace with a mere twist of that great arm."

"You forget the knife," the doctor interposed. The knife with the queer, curved blade, Cornelius. Kroll may be a vile-tempered scoundrel, but, although he wouldn't hesitate to resort to force, I don't think he's the kind who would use a knife. I do think he was keeping back something, however, something about Mrs. Leigh's life."

"You never asked him about her husband!" Peterby accused.

"Because if he had known he wouldn't have told us. I have an idea he suspects who might have killed her, but wild horses won't drag it out of him." The doctor pulled his ancient silver watch from his pocket and

compared it hurriedly with the clock. "Come on! We've just time to catch the nine-fifteen train."

They talked little on the way to town, for they were crowded on all sides by commuters, many of whom recognized them, and Dr. Oakes was kept busy parrying curious queries from old friends; but when the station was reached he drew his companion to a quiet corner near the telephone booths.

"Cornelius, we'll part company and meet here again at noon. You go to the Vanderpool and interview the Marquis Belletini. Make him see you, I don't care how, and find out all he can tell you. Then get the address of his chauffeur, Alfio Salerno, and see what you can learn about his precious cousin Cesare. I'll tackle Luigi at his fruit store and Tony down in Mulberry Street."

"You got that letter of Montie's with you?" Peterby asked anxiously. "Going to see a handwriting expert too, Doc? Those two messages, both anonymous—it shows there was a man and a woman in the scheme to bring Mrs. Leigh out of her retirement, but why? What was the object?"

"When we know that we'll be on the way to finding out who killed her," the doctor responded gravely. "Well, so long, Cornelius."

The Vanderpool Hotel, when its doors had first been opened scarcely a generation before, was the best, the last word in palatial luxury, but now newer and more gorgeous hostelries had risen in mushroom fashion, and it was fast being relegated to patrons of quiet taste and modest fortune. The Marquis Belletini was

at home but could not recall Mr. Cornelius Peterby, and he begged to be excused.

Peterby took his returned card, wrote "Deputy of Coroner, Edenvale, Long Island," upon it, and sent it once more to his reluctant host. This proved an open-sesame, and in a few moments he was ushered into the ponderously furnished drawing-room of a private suite and found himself confronted by a small, slim, elegant figure in a barbaric-hued dressing-gown, who stroked a pointed, white, Vandyke beard nervously with a dark, thin hand glittering with rings.

"Signor Peterbee?" The Marquis' tones were sharp and staccato. "To what, if one may ask, am I indebted for the interest of the Signor Coroner?"

"To the murder of your friend, Madame D'Almalli, I guess." Peterby bowed. "We're interviewing every one who knew her, Marquis, in an effort to find out something about her past and learn what possible enemies she may have had."

"You will be seated, sir?" The Marquis indicated a chair and seated himself on the other side of the table, his narrow foot in its pointed patent leather shoe tapping the floor impatiently, although his manner was suavely courteous. "I have seen the newspapers, of course. I know of this so frightful crime, but I fear I can be of little service to you. My friendship with the lady ended—ah, it is almost two years ago now, and I did not even dream that she was in this country until I learned of her death."

"Really, Marquis?" Peterby took the chair and allowed a significantly incredulous note to creep into

his tones. "That will be a surprise to Coroner Oakes. How long has Alfio Salerno been in your employ?"

The elderly gentleman flashed a quick glance at his questioner and stroked his beard once more. "For perhaps a year; but why do you ask? What has my chauffeur to do with the matter you are investigating?"

"That is one of the things we want to find out," Peterby countered. "He and Madame's chauffeur are cousins, and he visited Cesare frequently at her residence, Ivy Terrace—the last time not longer than a month ago."

The Marquis' slim figure grew suddenly tense.

"But it is I who am astonish'!" he exclaimed, his careful English lapsing a trifle. "Alfio, he tell to me that he have in this country a cousin and him he visit, but he say thees cousin is employ' by a Madame Smeeth of the Long Island. Me, I have not inquire more, I am not interes'—now we shall see!"

He drew the telephone on the table toward him and called: "Two-wan-o-t'ree Yor-r-k."

Peterby mentally noted it, and then as the Marquis' foot recommenced its nervous tapping he asked: "Do you know Rheinhardt Kroll?"

"The impresario? But certainlee! He is a genius, he has brought out the few really great singers of this day. Yes? the Marquis Belletini speaking. I should have Alfio, if you please. . . . What is it that you say? . . . I am surprise'! He has not ask' permission of me. . . . Yes, at once, you will be so good!" He hung up the receiver with a frown.

"That is the house where my chauffeur lives. Last

night late he depart with a traveling-case. I do not understand—never has he done so before!"

"I'll have to ask you for the address, Marquis, and the name of your garage, too," Peterby announced. "I rather expected this; Madame's chauffeur has disappeared also."

"Incredible!" the other cried. "I cannot believe that the—that Alfio, at least—could have knowledge of this so fearful thing! He lives at the house of one Ancilotti, at Eight-twentee on the West of the Ninth Street; and the garage, it is one-half block east, the establishment of Pietro de Pasqua. Why do you suspect, other than because of the vanishment of this Cesare?"

"Because a number of Madame's jewels have disappeared, too; they're gone from her safe," Peterby replied. "Now, Marquis, let's get down to Kroll. He managed Madame, arranged her engagements and all that. Have you seen him since you've been in this country?"

"No." The Marquis frowned, and there was a note of distaste in his tone. "My acquaintance with him is at an end when I cease to call upon Madame. He is a genius, as I have said, but he is also a peeg, Signor Peterbee! Of a coarseness, a vulgarity, unspeakable! He is not of my world, I do not desire to breathe the same air!"

Peterby nodded with intense satisfaction.

"No more do I, Marquis," he observed confidentially, to the other's amazement. "He's of interest to us just now, though. Who are the other singers he

managed? You must have known them through Madame D'Almalli too, didn't you?"

"Some of them, Signor. Flachaire and Zaminella, the little one with the deep contralto, and Sauvage the barytone, and Mademoiselle Larocque."

"Do you know of any rivalries, jealousies, quarrels, Madame D'Almalli may have had with her associates?" Peterby pursued, "any scenes, any lasting enmity?"

The Marquis hesitated and then shrugged.

"Jealous rivals both of the opera and in affairs of the heart would not have been uncommon to Madame. Of lasting anger, a—a desire for the revenge, of that I could not speak, Signor."

"You could, Marquis, if you wanted to," Peterby retorted shrewdly. "This is a time when common justice has got to be done, and we'll have to put our finer feelings aside. I don't mean any insult, sir, but we've learned from more than one source of your own former friendship for Madame D'Almalli. You say that friendship ceased, but does that mean you have no interest in seeing her murderer punished?"

The Marquis shook his head.

"By no means, Signor." His voice was velvety smooth, but there was a note in it so sinister that Peterby shivered in spite of himself. "I have the same desire to see this murderer punished as if the crime had been committed upon a woman wholly strange to me. You comprehend, I think? This is not the age of private revenge, of vendetta; one com-

plies now with the law. I trust most earnestly that the criminal shall be discovered."

"Then you believe that it was revenge?" Peterby asked quickly. "You think the disappearance of the jewels is a side issue, a blind, perhaps? Cesare may have known something, and run away, or been forced to go without being actually implicated himself?"

"Of Cesare I know nothing." The Marquis' small, sallow hands waved a definite dismissal of that topic. "That revenge might have been the motive for the crime—is it not that all things are possible?"

Peterby felt that he was not getting very far. That the courteous, suave individual before him nursed a bitter hatred of the dead woman was more obvious from his calm, cold indifference than if he had heaped abuse and maledictions upon her memory; and he as obviously knew of another who had reason to feel even more strongly against her. Could he be made to speak?

"Marquis, you want the law to punish Madame D'Almalli's murderer, and I represent the law; I ask you in the interests of justice to tell me if you know of any man or woman who ever threatened her life, if you've heard of any one who thought they had cause to do her harm."

The other considered gravely, and Peterby waited in silence until he raised his head.

"Signor, I have no interest in Madame's murderer, except that he *is* a murderer, but in the cause of abstract justice I can tell you of one occurrence in Milano

at the time of Madame's début that was of much scandal to those who knew. There may have been like episodes—I attach no significance to this, you comprehend, Signor, in connection with the tragedy of Wednesday night; I tell you merely in passing."

"I understand." Peterby nodded again, and although his tone was casual he felt a-tingle with anticipation.

"You have heard of Maria Tarquino? But perhaps you are not familiar with grand opera in this country?"

"N-no." Peterby replied uncertainly. Somewhere he had heard that name, and just lately, but for the moment memory escaped him. "Maria Tarquino? Another singer?"

"A lyric soprano second only to the voice of D'Almalli at its height." The Marquis spoke without enthusiasm. "The Tarquino is of ravishing beauty, also, the purest Andalusian type, and they are rivals almost from the first day they go to study under the great Martinez. The Tarquino is promised her début first at La Scala; but somehow it so arrange' that D'Almalli supersedes her, D'Almalli steps into her rôle on that night. The Tarquino conceals herself in D'Almalli's dressing-room during the first act, and when D'Almalli comes, radiant with triumph over the ovation she has receive', the Tarquino rushes upon her with a knife! It is the maid who save' her, she struggle with the Tarquino and scream for help; the Tarquino is remove', all is hushed up, but the whisper rises and spreads; soon all the world knows yet it does not reach the press.

"The Tarquino is ill with rage and chagrin; then comes delay and disappointment to keel the heart; but when D'Almalli's voice is gone her star rises again. It is whispered that always she will be embittered, never will she forget nor forgive, in spite of the sweetness of triumph now, with her former rival all but forgotten."

"Were they rivals in—another sense, Marquis?" Peterby asked cautiously.

A faint flush suffused the thin, patrician countenance of the older man.

"I cannot say, Signor. One hears—many things. The Tarquino has a host of admirers the most ardent, but neither prima donna has married."

"Then there is no 'Mr. Leigh'?" Peterby caught him up on the last remark.

"None of whom I have ever heard." The Marquis smiled slightly, ironically. "D'Almalli was most prudent, most clever. One could not but admire the wisdom that controlled such charm."

"And the other, this Tarquino?" Peterby hastily changed the subject, aware once more of a shuddering aversion. "Where is she now?"

"In New York City, I believe." The smile remained. "Kroll has brought her over; she makes her first appearance here this season with the Cosmopolitan Opera Company."

The Marquis attached no significance to the tale he had related. The woman had tried once to kill D'Almalli, she had never forgiven nor forgotten, she was here—and her rival had been stabbed! Peterby rose,

forgetting the missing jewels and the disappearance of the two chauffeurs in the blinking light of this new possibility. But there remained still the man before him, whose implacable hatred of the woman who had ruined him survived even her tragic death.

"Marquis," he began hesitatingly, but with dogged earnestness, "every one who knew Madame D'Almalli, her past friends and even the acquaintances of the neighborhood in which she has lived for the last year, has been asked, purely as a matter of form, to account for their movements on Wednesday night. If you would be so good—I could complete my report to the Coroner—"

"My alibi?" the Marquis interrupted. "With the greatest of pleasure, Signor Peterbee! I dine that evening with Signor Ogden Carmichael, who has done me the honor of purchasing several of my tapestries and paintings for his collection. I leave his home at eleven and I return here to my hotel. But you shall hear!"

He rose and pressed a bell in the wall beside the marble mantel, and almost instantly a tall, silent-footed manservant entered.

"Giuseppe, at what time did I reach home on Wednesday evening?"

"At eleven and twenty minutes, Signor il Marchese," Giuseppe replied promptly. "The Signor Doremus waits."

"Ah! And when does the Signor Doremus leave?"

"At ten minutes before one, Signor il Marchese."

"And I—did I again leave my rooms?"

"But no, Signor il Marchese." The man looked his surprise. "Not until the hour before noon of the next day—yesterday!"

"Very good." The Marquis turned to his visitor. "The Signor Doremus is President of your great Gibraltar Insurance Company and my very good friend. He will attest to this."

"It isn't necessary—mere matter of form, as I said," Peterby murmured hastily. "I will say 'good-morning', Marquis; thanks for this interview."

Peterby returned his ceremonious bow, while Giuseppe stood at the door to close it after showing the visitor out.

"It was a pleasure, Signor Peterbee! You shall tell the Signor Coroner that if I can be of further service he has but to command me."

"Whew!" Peterby whistled to himself when the door of the suite had closed behind him; and while he waited for the elevator he cogitated on his next move. Opera singers, fiery ones, who went about slashing at their enemies with knives did not in the least appeal to him, and he had explicit instructions from Dr. Oakes to interview only the Marquis and if possible his chauffeur, and then rejoin him at the station. Careful thought would be necessary before approaching "the Tarquino," and then the point would simply be to obtain and prove her alibi; for Peterby did not on reflection consider her as a factor at all. He had not a melodramatic turn of mind, and he could not conceive of a singer on the threshold of her greatest and long-deferred success rushing out into the coun-

try to murder a former rival who had long since sunk into oblivion.

Number Eight-twenty West Ninth Street proved to be a ramshackle brick flat-building with a little basement store of uninviting appearance, the single dirty window of which displayed murky olive oil in wicker-covered bottles, and bulbous distorted cheeses. Over the door was the legend: "Carmine Ancilotti, Importer," and Peterby passed beneath it into a dim interior which smelled to heaven.

A stout, oily individual with a streaked apron tied across his protuberant stomach lounged over the counter and greeted Peterby with a wary politeness: "W'at you like, mister?"

"To see a friend of yours, Alfio Salerno." Peterby made a sudden shift. "His employer was told he'd gone away last night without permission. I'm from the police."

"A-ah!" Ancilotti's face darkened, but he hurriedly lifted the hinged section of the counter and squeezed his bulk through the aperture. "Dat's da trut'! Alfio, he is-a frien' from da ol' countree; he lodge up-a stairs wit' us. Las' night he pack-a da bag and he say maybe he come back in wan-two day, maybe not. Tha's all he say, I don't know not'ing w'at he do!"

His tone was eager, almost cringing, but there was a flash in his eyes that made Peterby want to edge away. However, he held his ground and asked:

"Who came for him, his cousin Cesare?"

"Cesare?" squeaked Ancilotti. Then he recovered

himself and smiled. "No, not-a his cousin, a frien' w'at is call' Tony. Dey talk long-a time in da room of Alfio, an' toget'er dey depart. I don't know dese-a Tony, onlee hees name; he come maybe t'ree-four time to see Alfio."

"What time did they leave?"

"Seex o'clock eet ees w'en Tony come. Before eight dey go."

"And Alfio didn't say where?"

"No. He say onlee w'at I tell-a you." Ancilotti shrugged, and Peterby turned on his heel and departed, aware of the sly, oily grin which followed him. The man looked like a crook if he wasn't one, and it was probable that he imported other things less innocent than cheese and olive oil, but the main point was that if he knew of his lodger's plans he hadn't any intention of divulging any such knowledge other than the fact he had unwittingly disclosed, that Tony Matiorocca had given the alarm. Was Cesare with Luigi somewhere, the precious quartette traveling in twos, to meet in some distant city, perhaps, or in some outward-bound liner?

The garage of Pietro de Pasqua held no one who could furnish him with further information. Alfio had brought his employer's car back at five-thirty the previous afternoon and had said he would call for it at noon today. Nothing had been heard from him since.

It was only half-past eleven. Peterby paused irresolute and then turned toward Sixth Avenue. There would still be time to beard Kroll in his den and learn what he could of the new prima donna Tarquino.

He found a taxi and rode up to the opera house, making his way to the magnificent suite of offices occupied by the impresario, and sent in his name, not without some misgivings. Their first meeting that morning had not been propitious, and he doubted the outcome of the present one, but he was conscientiously determined to leave no stone unturned.

A dark, sleek young man with a harassed expression had led him from the outer office into a reception room crowded with heavily upholstered furniture and glittering with gold-leaf and mirrors, from the walls of which life-size portraits of opera stars in their favorite rôles gazed down superciliously upon him. Peterby seated himself uncomfortably on the edge of a chair as a door opened somewhere, and then there came a sound of voices, Kroll's ponderous guttural tones broken in upon by the high, clear and unmistakably angry exclamations of a woman.

What was that jargon they were talking? It sounded more Spanish than Italian. . . . Spanish! Peterby stiffened on his chair. The woman was a fury and no mistake, and from the dramatically pleading note in Kroll's interrupted utterances he was plainly getting the worst of it. Then a word caught his ear, a name, and Peterby's listening ears tingled. That name was "D'Almalli."

It was repeated again and again in the woman's tempestuous speech, and then he heard "Edenvale" and "Belletini," the latter coupled with indescribable scorn.

"Maria, carita mia"— Kroll was interrupted by a

rippling cascade of denunciation ending in a little shriek of rage. The door beside that through which the secretary had disappeared was torn violently open, and a woman swept across the room to the outer office, ignoring the rotund figure seated meekly in the corner. She was a tall, imperiously beautiful woman, flamboyant in purple cloth and sables, with masses of raven-black hair and great flashing dark eyes. Peterby gasped, and without giving himself time to think he rose and followed her.

CHAPTER XV

THE MANSION HOUSE GUEST

"MADAME TARQUINO?" Peterby found his voice as he caught up with the woman in the wide, echoing corridor.

"Yes." She wheeled, her eyes darting arrogant inquiry over his commonplace figure.

"I'm Peterby, an official from Edenvale." He squared his shoulders. "I went to Kroll just now for your address. There are one or two questions—"

"Questions? You wish to question me?" She spoke with no trace of a foreign accent, but in a lazy, veiledly insolent drawl. "Let Kroll answer your questions! I shall not be annoyed!"

"Only you can answer them, Madame," Peterby insisted doggedly while a dull glow crept into her round cheeks.

"Indeed? And what is it, this Edenvale? Is it perhaps a company of the motion-pictures?" She laughed, her full red lips curling. "I am a prima donna, not a pantomimiste!"

"Madame's memory is short." Peterby's temper was also, and his realization that he was not making good going of this venture did not add to his equanimity. "You were telling of Edenvale just now to Kroll—of Edenvale where Madame D'Almalli came to her death!"

"Ah! You listen, eh?" She swayed up to him, and for all her deliberate undulating grace and the deepening smile Peterby momentarily anticipated having his eyes scratched out. "It is not of interest to me, this death of an obscure, forgotten upstart! Why do you come to me?"

"To save you the further annoyance, Madame, of appearing before the Coroner's jury at the inquest!" Peterby stood his ground firmly. "It would be unfortunate if just before Madame's début she should be compelled by law to repeat that little incident in the dressing-room at La Scala and it reached the newspapers at last."

"Who told you of this?" Her voice was seethingly calm.

"All the opera world knows it, and Italian society, Madame; but that's not the point. If you will just tell me where you were on Wednesday night, from—say, seven o'clock on—"

"Italian society!" She mimicked him with an outburst of hysterical laughter, ignoring his suggestion. "You mean, then, the little, withered goat with empty pockets, the Marquis Belletini! It is he who has babbled! Very good, I tell you nothing! Nothing! I am the Tarquino, I do not care for your stupid law! The D'Almalli was of no importance, alive or dead; I know nothing of her, and I wish to know nothing! You shall go back and tell your superiors that the Tarquino has forgotten the existence of D'Almalli and forbids that she be reminded!"

"I'm only asking, just as a matter of form, where

you were," Peterby began once more, then suddenly jerked his head back as she snapped her fingers under his nose.

"Br-r-rgh! Canaille! Fat, round soup-pot! It is the affair of Tarquino alone where she goes and what she does! Approach me once again and I shall make of you the corpse! Let me pass!"

Peterby was in no sense barring her way, but he retreated perspiring freely, and Maria Tarquino swept by and returned in a whirlwind to Kroll's office. An elevator was descending, and the coroner's deputy thankfully took sanctuary within it, proceeding to the street, where he hailed another taxi and drove to the station. His aversion to the impresario had given place to sympathetic pity; he wouldn't be in Kroll's shoes for the next quarter of an hour for all the opera contracts in Christendom!

Dr. Oakes was waiting in the corner of the station where they had separated, and he stepped quickly forward.

"You're late, Cornelius. Any news?"

"Belletini's out of it, I guess, but his chauffeur has disappeared, too. Let's get a bite of lunch in the restaurant here and we can talk; we may not have a chance in the train." Peterby led the way, and when they were seated at a quiet table he asked: "Did you find Tony?"

"No. He did have an office in Mulberry Street, but he closed it temporarily yesterday."

"I thought so. He came for Alfio and took him away from his lodgings last night." Peterby gave the

gist of his interviews with Ancilotti and the garage man and added: "Belletini's a nice little old guy. He does look kind of like a goat, as I heard him called a few minutes ago, but his alibi is sound. He told me that some one tried to stab Mrs. Leigh once before—another singer named Maria Tarquino."

"Great Scott!" The doctor stared. "I wonder where she is now?"

"In Kroll's office giving him the devil." Peterby's lips set grimly. "She called me a fat round soup-pot when I tried to find out where she was Wednesday night, and said she'd make a corpse of me if I approached her again."

He described the conversation with the Marquis and that which he had overheard from Kroll's inner office, together with the subsequent scene in the corridor, and the doctor listened with close attention while their luncheon cooled before them.

"And Belletini said this woman had nursed her grievance all these years?" The latter frowned thoughtfully. "Do you think it was Lutrelle who put up the money to have Mrs. Leigh appear in place of this Madame Tarquino?"

"No, I don't." Peterby helped himself to a generous portion of steak. "If you ask me I believe that's where part of the Marquis' patrimony went to. He flushed up when I asked him if the two women were rivals in another way besides professionally; and that wild-cat Tarquino wouldn't have pronounced his name as if it was poison—she's the one who called him a little withered goat with empty pockets—if she hadn't

been willing to help empty those pockets herself only —well, he transferred his attentions, I think. Anyway, I'd like to know where she was on Wednesday night. What if she followed Kroll, and waited till he'd gone? Remember they were having a fine old row just now, with 'D'Almalli' mentioned more than once. Doc! That letter! Did you see an expert?"

"Yes. It was written by a woman." The doctor paused. "That is, the letter itself was. Do you remember what I said about the writing on the envelope, that it looked different, stronger somehow? It was; a man had written on the envelope, in imitation of the woman's hand!"

"Good heavens! What do you make of that?" Peterby demanded. "You said, too, that the names 'Leigh' and 'D'Almalli' were written by fits and starts, as if they had stopped to consider how to spell them."

"I think now, Cornelius, that the one short sentence that note is composed of was dictated to the woman by the man. He might have spelled out the names, which would account for their being haltingly written; and he addressed the envelope himself so that she wouldn't get Montford Lutrelle's name and address. At least, that's what my friend Latimer says, and he's been called in as expert on some celebrated cases."

"Latimer! I should think so!" Peterby exclaimed. "Did he say the woman's was an uneducated hand? Madame Tarquino might have gotten her maid and some manservant to put the thing over!"

"With what object, granted that she knew where her old rival was living in seclusion?" The doctor

shook his head as he stirred his coffee. "Hating her, would she have sent to her side a man who still loved and wanted to marry her?"

"The Lord knows what motive that woman would take into her head! She is capable of anything," Peterby declared with conviction. "Did you have any better luck with Luigi, the fruit-store man, than you did with Tony?"

"No. The sign over the door reads 'D'Annibale and Piscitelli' and it's a wretched little place, far downtown, sandwiched in between a cigar store and a second-hand clothier's. The shop itself is very small, but I caught a glimpse of a long back room with tables and chairs. I think it's a blind and he's running some sort of game there. Anyway it isn't exactly the neighborhood which would support a dealer in fancy fruits, and his stock looked pretty stale. There was only a draggled-looking woman in charge of it, and she said Piscitelli was in Italy; she was Luigi's sister and he had gone to Boston on business, left yesterday, and she didn't know when he'd be back. I was just leaving when a fellow sauntered in in plain clothes but with 'police headquarters' written all over him, so I guess the sheriff has done what he said he would, and called in their help. That'll mean more stuff for the papers, but it's just as well."

"Why?" asked Peterby. "We don't want the city department to get the credit away from your office!"

"What credit?" The doctor smiled wryly, and pushing aside his empty cup he leaned forward. "Mrs. Leigh has been dead thirty-six hours, and how much

nearer are we or anybody to discovering who killed her? We know who dropped that waistcoat button on the terrace and was hanging around the gate in the hedge when you passed through; we know who called on her in the afternoon; and they've both got alibis that could possibly be shot full of holes. We know of one woman and two men who had reason to hate her, reason enough for more than one murder in the past, Cornelius, for she ruined all three of them in one way and another, and only the woman has succeeded in coming back. We know that her jewels are gone and her chauffeur has run away; but with all these facts and possibilities and motives, what have we? Exactly nothing!"

"It looks as if we had too much!" Peterby retorted. "There's some one we haven't thought of in connection with the affair because he hasn't cropped up since, but do you recall what Lopey told us about the man 'Mr. Shell-something' who called Mrs. Leigh on the telephone only once, but that once was last week? She said Mrs. Leigh nearly had a fit and locked herself in the library alone to answer, but the girl could hear her denying or refusing something; repeating 'no' over and over. She was in 'a regular tantrum' afterward, according to Lopey, and didn't get over it till Rosalie Gresham ran in late in the afternoon. I wonder if the lawyer Mitchell would know who he was!"

"I never thought to ask him," the doctor admitted. "I don't believe he would have been of any importance in her life, though, or we'd have heard of him; but there are still a few trunks and boxes in the attic to

examine more carefully. Mitchell says we've got everything connected with Mrs. Leigh's private affairs, but, unless he held out on us, there are a few things we've found out already that he didn't know. Come on, let's get the one-twenty back, and we'll stop off at New Gideon; I'll drop in for a word with the district attorney while you circulate around generally and see if you can find out anything about strangers in town or folks from our way."

New Gideon was the last station before Edenvale. Although larger than that village, as befitted the county seat, it seemed far less energetic and progressive. Left to his own devices, Peterby wandered down the main street with its rows of ancient, white-painted frame houses, before which, on the edge of the curb, hitching-posts still stood although their usefulness had long since departed. The courthouse to which Dr. Oakes had gone, together with the post-office and high school had been new a generation before, but the double-verandaed hotel was a landmark known for almost a century, and Peterby's indecisive steps gravitated there now, as usual in the rare instances when business of one sort or another had taken him to the quaint old town.

Martin Tillinghast, the proprietor's shiftless brother, who had held a nondescript sinecure around the hostelry for years, was behind the desk in a clean shirt and stiff collar, his mild, good-natured face infused with an expression of alert authority which sat almost comically upon it; and, looking about at the unwonted stir and activity in the office, Peterby re-

marked: "So you're clerking for Joe, eh, Martin? The county fair's been over more than a fortnight, and there's no big trial on. Why all the new arrivals? Is there a convention in town?"

"All fellers from the papers on account o' that murder down your way, Mr. Peterby." Martin adjusted his steel-rimmed spectacles and pointed with a horny finger to the crowded page of the blotter. "Look! They all come flockin' in this morning with a sight o' cameras, and they've hired every automobile and rig in town to haul 'em over to Edenvale; couldn't get took in there at the hotel for love nor money, and Joe's out now trying to get extry help. He sent the two waitin'-girls away after the fair, thinkin' that Bessie and me could 'tend dinin'-room till court opened anyways, and now Tilly's up and gone!"

"Who's Tilly?" Peterby asked idly.

"Half-wit Swede girl from over to Jimpson's Mills that's been sweepin' and makin' beds here all summer. She ain't a half-wit exactly, but just dumb—got a notion Wednesday that she could get a grand job in the city and left bag and baggage. Joe didn't care then, 'cause the city feller'd gone too on the early train and we only had two-three transients from 'round the country."

"Who was the city fellow?" Peterby had pricked up his ears. A stranger had been there and left Wednesday morning. The anonymous letter had been mailed Tuesday afternoon from the New Gideon post-office. It was a slight and tenuous thread, but he must cover every possibility.

"There he is." Martin turned back a page of the huge old register and pointed once more. " 'S. Leeds, New York'—good-lookin', lah-de-dah kind o' feller, like the womenfolks get crazy over, but for all his airs and fancy clothes there was a shrewd look to his eye, 's if he wouldn't get took in easy on no deal. He come Saturday and said he was lookin' to open a real-estate office and make things hum 'round here, but he didn't do much hummin' himself, just set 'round. Joe give him the only room that had a telephone extension in it, but he never used it, not once. He'd paid up a week in advance, and Tuesday night he said he'd go back to the city the next day and we'd hear when he was comin' out again, but we ain't heard yet, and he took all three of his bags with him."

Peterby had listened carefully to the garrulous flow, and now he glanced down at the signature with an air of sudden interest.

"That's funny, Martin! I know a man named Sam Leeds in the real-estate business in New York, and he's good-looking and a snappy dresser, too. Did this one have reddish hair and blue eyes?"

The old man shook his head. "No. His hair was blond and slick, with his forehead slantin' right back into it, and his eyes kind o' yeller-brown. He had a little, short, yeller mustache, too, and a crease down his chin like a gal's, and he walked real short and quick. Took quite a shine to Bessie, but she's seen enough o' c'mercial trav'lers not to get her head turned by fool talk. What's new 'bout the murder? The district attorney's hoppin' mad, says his office isn't

gettin' a square deal by Doc Oakes nor the sheriff either."

"I don't know anything more than the papers had this morning and that was news to us, about Mrs. Leigh being a singer, I mean," Peterby disclaimed with a shrug. "I came over to see about my tax rebate. Got any cigars without whiskers on 'em?"

He strolled out presently to the porch, deserted now in the sunlight of early afternoon, and glanced up and down the street, but Dr. Oakes was evidently still in conference with the district attorney, so he made his way over to the post-office. That, too, was without its usual group of loiterers, for it was just between mail-times; but the postmaster himself greeted him through the grill of the stamp window with eagerly inquisitive questions about the sensation of the day. Peterby parried them until the other was satisfied that he had pumped him dry, then volunteered:

"I came over to see a city man I know who was staying at the Mansion House, but I understand he left Wednesday. Leeds, his name was. Did you know him?"

"I ought to!" The postmaster chuckled. "Calc'late he pestered me more for a letter in the few days he was here than any lovesick girl in the township! It never did come, and maybe that's why he went away."

Peterby frowned. "Funny he didn't let me know. He was to write me sure on a little business matter by Tuesday afternoon, and I'd have got it over at Edenvale by Wednesday morning, but I haven't heard at all."

"He did mail a letter Tuesday afternoon, but it wasn't to you," the postmaster observed, and Peterby's pulse missed a beat. "He was so darned careful to hold it so's I wouldn't see the address when he slapped the stamp on it that I sold him, that after he'd dropped it through the slot and gone I went right 'round to the chute and took it off the top of the pile. It was to somebody in New York; a funny kind of a name—'Suttle' or 'Sutton' or something. Joe Tillinghast says Leeds is a real-estate man; calc'late he didn't see's New Gideon could be boomed any!"

The hearty laugh rang out, and Peterby echoed it as he turned away, but the blood was racing to his temple. Leeds had sent that anonymous letter to Lutrelle! He had got some woman to write it for him, but he addressed the envelope himself. What woman had helped him, in all innocence perhaps? Could it have been Joe Tillinghast's daughter, Bessie? Her uncle said Leeds had sought her out for attention. What story could he have given her to induce her to write that sentence down and keep silent about it afterwards?

What letter had Leeds waited for vainly since Saturday? He had registered under his own name, or at least the one in which the expected letter would have been addressed. His first name started with "S"; was he the "Mr. Shell-something" whose telephone call to Mrs. Leigh the week before had thrown her into such agitation?

While he stood hesitating on the post-office steps, with these questions crowding his brain, he saw Bes-

sie Tillinghast herself come down the steps of the hotel and start briskly across to the drugstore on the corner. She was a bright-eyed, apple-cheeked young woman with a self-reliant air, and, as he followed her on a sudden impulse, Peterby recalled with misgiving that she had taken a course in a business college; surely she would not have written that illiterate scrawl!

Nevertheless he went on and entered the drugstore just as the girl was turning from the prescription counter.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Bessie." Peterby took off his hat and asked with polite concern: "Anybody sick?"

"Only mother," the girl responded. "She's always poorly, and cooking for a sudden rush makes her head worse. It's terrible about Mrs. Leigh, isn't it, Mr. Peterby? Who do you think did it?"

"Nobody seems to have a notion. Wouldn't you like a soda? It isn't too cold yet for ice-cream."

"Thanks, it never is!" Bessie laughed. "I'll take chocolate, please. Think of Mrs. Leigh being a great opera singer! I've seen her two or three times here in New Gideon, but I didn't know who she was till her picture came out in the papers this morning."

"Didn't Mr. Leeds mention her to you?" Peterby opened his eyes in bland surprise, adding hurriedly: "But he naturally wouldn't since he left before there was any excitement about her, and then, too, he only knew her in a business way."

Bessie lowered her soda-glass and stared.

"The Mr. Leeds who was staying with us?" There

was blank amazement in her tone. "He never spoke of her at all, nor of you either, Mr. Peterby! I thought he didn't know any one around here, but I didn't bother much with him."

"I knew him in a business deal too; real estate," Peterby explained. "He's a good-looking fellow, isn't he?"

Bessie shrugged and took a heaping spoonful of cream before she replied. "I never thought so. He was kind of cheap—talked to Tilly the chambermaid a lot, and she used to rave about him. I shouldn't wonder if he put the idea in her head that she could get a better place in the city and that's why she left right after he did."

"Too bad," Peterby remarked sympathetically. "Puts all that extra work on your mother and you. Your Uncle Martin was speaking about her going; she came from Jimpson's Mills, didn't she?"

"Yes." Bessie nodded. "She's a niece of Sigred Stefanssen, the foreman. Oh, here's Dr. Oakes!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE REVEALING LIGHT

THE doctor paused anxiously in the drugstore door and on seeing Peterby with the girl he entered hurriedly, but before he could speak his colleague said cordially: "Hello, Doc! So you did finish your business in time for us to go back together! We met in the train coming over, Miss Bessie, but the doctor's so confoundedly secretive these days that I couldn't get a thing out of him about the murder."

Dr. Oakes took the hint and after greeting Bessie Tillinghast remarked: "Sorry to interrupt this feast of sweets, Cornelius, but if you're coming back with me our train leaves in eight minutes. I saw your father just now, Miss Bessie; he's got an extra woman to help out at the hotel."

"Oh!" Bessie gulped down the last of her soda. "I'll have to get right on back! Thanks so much, Mr. Peterby. Good-by!"

She whirled out of the drugstore, and as they turned from the counter Peterby asked: "Was the district attorney sore? I heard he thinks he hasn't had a square deal from you and the sheriff, but he and that pet of his Creech had better look for what's under their own noses!"

"So you found out something here?" The doctor's harassed face lightened.

"I've found out who the man was who sent that anonymous letter, and I think I know what woman wrote it for him, but they're both gone. Tell you in the train," Peterby panted as they hastened toward the station. "Leeds, his name is—think he's the one who 'phoned Mrs. Leigh last week!"

They reached the platform just as the train was pulling in, and found a seat at the rear of the smoker, far enough removed from their nearest neighbor to admit of a confidential talk, and Peterby told the result of his efforts, ending diffidently: "I know it sounds pretty hopeless, with Leeds and this girl Tilly both gone. Everybody seems to disappear as soon as we get a line on them; first that bunch of wops and now these two. I told you that fellow who 'phoned Mrs. Leigh would crop up sooner or later, but still, I don't know. He sounds rather cheap, as Bessie Tillinghast said, and I can't somehow imagine any one like that in connection with a—a famous singer, can you?"

"Cheap, because he talked to the chambermaid, Tilly? If she wrote that sentence down for him, he had a good object in playing up to her; he probably sized her up and saw she was stupid enough not to be curious, and if he persuaded her to go to the city and look for a job it must have been just to make sure she wouldn't blab." The doctor puffed at his cigar thoughtfully. "I'd like to get hold of that girl, Cornelius."

"My car roosted at your curb all last night in the rain but it ought to be dried out by now," Peterby remarked. "I thought if you've nothing for me to do

the rest of the afternoon I'd drive over to Jimpson's Mills and see the girl's uncle. I know him, he had those new doors made for my garage last spring."

"I wish you would—here we are!" The doctor sprang up impatiently. "That's a long twelve miles by rail, isn't it? I'll just see what's happened at the office and then run out myself to Ivy Terrace."

When they reached his gate, however, a huge purple limousine, with gold stripes and glittering lamps, drew up before it with an important sweep, and a footman in livery jumped down and opened the door. Peterby caught a glimpse of black hair and sables and the flash of a pair of luminous dark eyes, and he turned precipitately to where his own smaller car was parked at the curb.

"Go in, Doc, you've got to; but I'm off!" he exclaimed over his shoulder. "I'm no impresario, and I've had all I want from that songbird! It's Madame Tarquino herself!"

Jimpson's Mills lay in an easterly direction, almost equidistant from Edenvale and New Gideon, and the sun was low when Peterby reached it. The whirr and drone of the great wood-turning plant assailed his ears before he came to the crossroad with its cluster of neat cottages each set in a tiny yard flaming with autumnal bloom.

Peterby did not drive to the saw-mill itself, but stopped before the first of the little homes from which narrow plank walks led to the others.

"Where's the foreman's cottage, sonny?" he called to a small, tow-headed boy swinging on the gate.

"Stefanssen's? That one there, with the pigeon loft." The boy pointed. "See 'em circling 'round, mister?"

Peterby did see, and alighting he started along the walk toward the little yellow house with rows of dahlias upheld primly on sticks beside the door. It opened at his approach, and a young woman appeared on the threshold smiling vacuously in welcome. The last rays of the setting sun turned the thick yellow braids plaited smoothly about her head into gold, and her bovine eyes were very blue.

"Is this Sigred Stefanssen's house?" Peterby asked. "I know he's at the mill yet, but I've got a message for his niece who worked over at the Mansion House in New Gideon till last Wednesday. Could you tell me where she's gone, Ma'am?"

"I bane Tilly!" The young woman blushed as if the confession were a painful one, and twisted a corner of her apron awkwardly. "I go to de city, but I come home."

"You?" Peterby beamed upon her, hat in hand. "Why didn't you go back to the hotel?"

"I got a scare to." She dropped her eyes. "Dey bane mad wid me dat I leave."

"Didn't you like it at New Gideon?"

"Sure, I like it." A shadow crossed the wide, vacant face. "I yoost b'lieve I could find me a better yob in de city, but it was all lies."

"Somebody told you to go? Was it Mr. Leeds?" Peterby watched her closely. "Did he say what you could do?"

"Yes, he bane de faller." Her full lips protruded sullenly. "He tell me I was too smart to be makin' beds, dat I yoost go to intelliyence office and dey get me a fine yob as lady's maid. So I go, but de intelliyencer give me de laugh."

"Too bad!" Peterby sympathized. "Did you tell Mr. Leeds? Where is he now?"

"I don't know. He go away, too. Vy should I tall him? He yoost bane he yollying." Her eyes held hurt bewilderment mingled with a dull acceptance, and Peterby saw only candor in their trustful gaze.

"Couldn't he tell you where he was going when he left the Mansion House?" he insisted.

"No. He give me a dollar and say I was too good for dere, I bane vastin' my time; and after he go I tank so too, and I leave. Now I got to get me anoder yob."

"That's what I came about," Peterby observed, adding: "But tell me first about Mr. Leeds. You wrote something down for him once, didn't you?"

"I—write—sometings?" Tilly frowned as if in an effort to think.

"Yes," Peterby urged patiently. "On Tuesday, wasn't it? Didn't he ask you to put something down on a piece of paper, tell you what to write, and you did? Something about a lady living in Edenvale?"

"Oh, sure!" Her brow cleared. "Dat vas in de afternoon, ven I coom vid towels and fresh vater for de pitcher. He holler out to coom in, ven I knocked tvice, and he is at de telephone dat vas on de vall. 'Tilly,' he says, 'write dis down for me, vill you?

Dere's a pencil and paper on de bureau.' I find it, and he says vat he is hearing out of the 'phone: 'The' —sometings, a name he spells out good but I forget— 'under de name of Mrs. Alma Leigh is living at Ivy Terrace, Edenvale, Long Island.' I put it down yoost like dat, and I don't forget notings vat I write vonce. I tank dat Mrs. Leigh bane de same lady got murdered Vednesday night, isn't it? Det vas fonny, Mr. Leeds hears about her out of de 'phone! But you got yob for me, mister? You tell me you got message, you coom about dat?"

"From Mr. Tillinghast. I was over at the Mansion House only today and they want you back, Tilly," Peterby explained speciously. "I said I might drop by this way and I'd leave word for you in case you didn't like the city."

"Dat's goot. I go back tomorrow!" Tilly smiled a wide-toothed grin. "I ain't bane a fool again! T'ank you, mister!"

Peterby left her and made his way back to his car, almost stunned by the success of his venture. Leeds had attained his object in a simple but ingenious manner, and evidently by the time-worn ruse of holding down the receiver hook and pretending to hold a conversation over the closed wire, for Martin Tillinghast said that he had never once used the extension in his room. But who was he? What connection had he with the past of the woman known to them as Mrs. Leigh and why had he summoned Lutrelle to her side?

All the way back to Edenvale he pondered the questions, but he could see only one alternative, beyond

what possible information the trunks in the attic at Ivy Terrace might still yield, and that was to sound the lawyer Mitchell once more.

It was eight o'clock when he reached the main road leading into the village, and stopped at his own bungalow for a bath and change while the cook prepared a hasty meal for him. He was just finishing when the telephone rang and Dr. Oakes' voice demanded: "Where have you been? I've scoured the country for you!"

"Why, what's up?" Peterby asked in his turn. "You know where I went, and I found the party I was looking for, too! I was just getting a bite before coming to you. Did your visitor offer to make mincemeat of you?"

"My visitor? Oh, umph! No, that was very satisfactory. You wait there and I'll stop by for you."

Not sorry for the respite, Peterby, whose two strenuous days brought their reaction now that he found himself in his own familiar surroundings, sank down in his library chair with a grunt of relief and took up the evening paper which had been placed ready to his hand. The mystery of the great D'Almalli tragedy still held its prominent position on the front page, with tributes from the famous tenor, Flachaire, and Rheinhardt Kroll. The latter announced that the body of the murdered songstress would lie in state from Saturday till Monday, when the funeral would take place from historic St. Jude's, and Alma D'Almalli would rest in a magnificent mausoleum at Greendale.

The mystery of her origin was indicated by the

various interviews with persons who had come in contact with her at various stages of her career, to each of whom the same questions had been put and answered unanimously. Alma D'Almalli had first appeared in New York, alone, six years before, the possessor of a marvelous voice, great beauty, and exceedingly modest resources. A prominent teacher became interested in her development, and from that period her rise had been as meteoric as the end was sudden and unforeseen; while as far as any of her associates knew she might have descended from the clouds on the day she made her inconspicuous advent into the city.

Peterby had scarcely finished the various articles relative to the case, when the doctor's car chugged up the driveway and its owner entered the library to fling himself into the opposite chair across the hearth with a sigh.

"Cornelius, you're too confoundedly comfortable here!" He gazed into the small, wood fire which his host had lighted, and his tired features relaxed. "I declare, this grows more complicated all the time! We dispose of one possibility only to have another loom up to stump us, and we have to begin all over again. But you said you found the party you were after; does that mean the mill-foreman or the girl Tilly herself?"

"The girl, and she wrote that letter!" Peterby recounted the episode of his visit to Jimpson's Mills, and then summed up: "That disposes of Lutrelle's letter, and I suppose it's safe to assume that Leeds

telephoned to Kroll also, as soon as he got in town; but then where are we? Leeds has gone and we've no means of unearthing him to learn his object and whether or not he's the man who 'phoned Mrs. Leigh last week. If we should find him by a miracle and he's got an alibi for Wednesday night, we're stumped again, as you say, Doc. I don't mind telling you I think we're tackling this thing from the wrong angle, looking up motives and past enmities and romances; that knife's the biggest factor, the one the crime was committed with, and if we could lay our hands on that—! But tell me about Maria Tarquino's visit. I can't imagine any interview being 'satisfactory' with that human tornado!"

Doctor Oakes smiled. "I found Madame most tractable. She was sorry for her rudeness to my agent but she had had a very trying hour, a disagreement with her impresario, and she was really ill. However, she had motored out to offer me any possible assistance; she could do no less for the memory of one who had been her sister in the world of opera."

"Then I don't care how great a singer she is, she's a greater actress still!" Peterby declared with conviction. "Her sister, eh? I guess my threat to have her called at the inquest to relate that little knife-drawing episode in Milan had more to do with it than any belated sense of duty, and maybe Kroll made her see reason. Did you find out where she was on Wednesday night?"

"At home, in the private residence she has rented for herself on East Sixty-eighth Street. All her serv-

ants can testify to that, and her physician, Anstruther the throat specialist, for she caught a chill in the afternoon and went immediately to bed."

Peterby snorted. "Easiest framed alibi in the world! Every opera singer who has a row with the conductor or don't like the way the tenor parts his hair can find a fashionable doctor to certify to that good old chill! No reflections on your profession, Doc, it's the truth! I don't say Madame was out this way, but I do affirm that she wasn't necessarily at home. What else did she tell you?"

"That she hadn't seen or heard of Madame D'Almalli since her breakdown, until the papers came out this morning. She had quarreled with her in Milan, but it was a clash of temperaments merely, with no petty jealous motive such as the gossips averred, and the knife episode, as you call it, was a pure fabrication." The doctor paused. "So much for that. She never heard of a husband but suspected that there was such an encumbrance, or the D'Almalli would have taken advantage of one of the offers made in the heyday of her success. She had disagreed with Kroll this morning over his resolve to give Madame an impressive funeral. She considered it more kind to her memory to let her rest in oblivion than to rake up the story of her pitiful failure."

"I don't doubt she objected, but not from the motive she alleged," Peterby observed dryly. "Was that all? Not a word about Belletini?"

"Oh, quite a few, but they were concerned mainly with his ancestry and his probable ultimate destina-

tion." Dr. Oakes' eyes twinkled. "As for his present status, I gathered that he was a germ, a microbe rather, but one which had been de-fatted! Privately, I agree with you; the Marquis himself, as well as that operatic début, was the motive of that little melodrama behind the scenes. That's all I got from her, though; she all but embraced me when she left. It's odd that you should have spoken about the knife just now, for after Madame departed I drove up to Ivy Terrace, and Sim Attell and Ben Coleburn, the sheriff's deputies, were patrolling the grounds beside the Rose Acre hedge still, as well as Matt Isley, while the reporters' cameras snapped from a respectful distance; and Matt told me that Anse had more deputies all over the place, ever since my last visit, before dawn this morning. It seems that after I left they discovered some one skulking around the hedge again, but they got away, and the constable has an idea they'll be back tonight. That's why I've been scouring the country for you."

"It must have been that Luigi—if the man with the scar I saw in the train was he. What makes Matt and the sheriff think he'll be back tonight?" Peterby opened the humidor and pushed it toward his guest. "Unless the jewels are hidden somewhere—"

"Then they must be hidden in that hedge, or near it," the doctor retorted. "Both Matt and Sim heard a steady, systematic rustling as if somebody were beating the hedge, fumbling and searching in the very thickest part of it and coming slowly nearer. They

crept up and caught sight through the rain of a muffled figure, but it slipped away before they could close in on it; they're both sure whoever it was was hunting for something and, being scared off, will come again tonight."

"Come on!" Peterby plucked the just lighted cigar from his mouth and rose precipitately. "We'll have a little look ourselves, eh? Good thing there isn't a moon tonight! Which side of the hedge did they find the fellow on?"

"The terrace side. The figure disappeared through the gate leading into Rose Acre, but the Greshams' front hedge is low, you know, and could easily be vaulted," the doctor replied, as they made their way out to his car. "There were no footprints, of course, on the lawn."

They drove in silence to Ivy Terrace, for they had wearied of idle conjecture, and each was busied with his own thoughts. The night was very dark. A thin haze of cloud obscured the stars, and there was no wind, so the stillness was almost oppressive in its intensity. Clusters of lights beside the road indicated that a few vehicles subsidized by the representatives of the press still lingered, held perhaps by the unexplained presence of the patrol.

As they alighted Matt Isley's stocky figure emerged from the gloom.

"That you, Doc? I put Sim up one end of the hedge and Ben the other, leaving you the space around the gate like you asked me to; but don't let the sher-

iff get wind of it in case the feller shows up again and you don't get to nab him," he cautioned between crunches of the peanuts he was devouring from a paper bag. "Walk along right close to the hedge where it hills up straight instead of being cut into terraces, and you'll find the going easier. The feller might be along any time from now till morning."

They left him crackling nutshells, and climbed up beside the hedge, which rustled in the silence to the merest touch, until they reached the gate.

"We'll wait about ten feet above," the doctor whispered. "That's where the figure got away from them last night. Too bad we never thought to bring flashlights.

"I've got my cigar-lighter," Peterby responded. "It throws a ray for about a foot in darkness like this. I wonder what time it is?"

"It was half past nine when we left your house; must be nearly ten now, but they're still up over at Rose Acre." The doctor folded his long legs and seated himself tailor-fashion beside the hedge. "Might as well make ourselves comfortable; we're in for a long wait, I guess."

His prediction proved correct, for ten o'clock and then eleven sounded from the distant church, and still the silence about them remained unbroken. The lights at Rose Acre had long since been extinguished, and the cluster down in the roadway was dispersed, while Peterby gripped his cold cigar between his teeth and ached in every joint from the cramped position, for

which he was not constituted. The time seemed interminable, and he was inwardly scoffing at the possibility of their vigil bearing fruit when all at once a stealthy sound, merely a whisper, as of a light, cautious footstep on grassy lawn, came to his ears from beyond the barrier! He glanced toward the doctor in time to see the silhouette of his spare frame stiffen tensely, and then he wormed his own way closer to the densely interwoven branches of the privet, still almost in full leaf.

The whisper resolved itself now into actual creeping footsteps just abreast of them, and the hedge rustled and snapped as something moved warily, thrusting the twigs aside. Then low to the ground a small wavering white object appeared like a twisting, groping tentacle.

Peterby emitted a grunt and reached for it, but the doctor had swooped forward and seized the outstretched hand in a firm, relentless grip.

"Go 'round through the gate and grab him!" he commanded in a subdued whisper. The hand was struggling wildly in his grasp, but no sound had come from the other side of the hedge. "When you get him cough, but not loud enough for the others to hear. I want to look at him first—he's only a boy, I think."

Peterby had already scrambled to his feet, and now he bounded to the gate. The hand succeeded in wrenching itself free but the doctor seized it again, and in another moment there came a cough that ended in a strangling gasp from the other side of the hedge.

Peterby had obeyed instructions and seized the recumbent form with both pudgy hands; but there seemed something strange here, and planting one knee upon it he felt for his cigar-lighter and touched the spring. The head of the prostrate one twisted around, and in the concentrated glow he found himself staring into the indignant face of Miss Hannah Parrish!

CHAPTER XVII

DEAD FACE AND LIVING

"MY God!" Peterby gasped as the gate clicked softly, and unconsciously the pressure of his knee on the spinster's prostrate form increased as his weight sagged.

"Got him?" Dr. Oakes' question trailed off into an astounded silence, which was broken abruptly by their victim.

"Get off me!" Miss Parrish commanded, and as Peterby rose in convulsive haste she turned over and sat up to face them. "You're a precious pair of fools!"

"Hannah, what are you doing here?" the doctor demanded sternly.

"Shaking hands with you through the hedge, evidently!" she retorted. "I'd like to know what you two are doing and why this fat lummox came and sat on me!"

"What were you trying to find in that hedge?" pursued the doctor doggedly. "Mr. Peterby's my deputy, and we're here on official business, Hannah. I'll have to ask you to explain."

"Look here, Daniel, don't you use that tone to me!" Miss Parrish felt of her disheveled, scanty hair and got to her feet disdaining his aid. "Official business, indeed! Squatting under that hedge like a couple of

sick owls! I'm spending the night with Nellie Gresham, if you want to know, and I came out for a little stroll before going to bed. I don't see—"

"Neither do we!" he interrupted grimly. "You don't stroll lying flat like a worm! What were you feeling around in that hedge for?"

There was a note in his tone that Peterby had never heard there before, and he waited, still discreetly silent himself, for the answer. It was long in coming, but at last Miss Parrish snapped: "It's none of your business, but if you will snoop, I'm hunting for my switch!"

"Your—what?"

"My back hair! I walked along this way and heard somebody breathing over there like a grampus! When I stretched up and tried to look over the top of the hedge that branch caught my switch and lifted it off my head. It's not hanging there now and I thought it had dropped down on the other side. Go and look for it yourself if you don't believe me! What did you think I expected to find—that woman's jewels?"

She had pointed to the low-hanging branch of a tree just above them which swept out over the top of the hedge, and Peterby could feel the doctor's eyes upon him.

"I'll go and see if it's there, Miss Parrish," he offered. "I must apologize for handling you roughly, but I—we were looking for quite another person." He turned to the gate once more and stooping trained his pinpoint of light along the ground, but his efforts were not rewarded until he raised it, scanning the hedge

itself. There, sweeping over from its top, he saw a long coil of sandy hair, with the glint of pins through it here and there, and he pulled it down gingerly between thumb and forefinger. Turning again he started to retrace his steps but halted as a low sentence came to him over the barrier.

"Neither you nor any one else, Daniel, will ever find out how that woman came to her death!"

Peterby did not realize that he was deliberately eavesdropping, for, though Miss Parrish's utterances were usually positive, there was a note of such absolute conviction in this that his attention was arrested, and he did not wonder at the doctor's query: "What makes you so sure? Somebody must have told you about the missing jewels, for it hasn't come out in the papers yet, but you know the chauffeur is gone, too—"

"Yes," she interrupted decidedly. "Cesare may have taken them, granted the opportunity, for he looked like a fine young blackguard in spite of his spic-and-span appearance, but he never killed her. Enough people had reason to, heaven knows, but you'll never find the one who had the courage! I'd like to know how long ago you found out who she really was. You've got most of the secrets of the countryside in your keeping, Daniel, but I didn't think she was the confiding kind."

With a start Peterby came to himself, flushing in the darkness as he hastily stumbled toward the gate. As he passed through he called cautiously:

"I've got it!"

"Well, that's something. That idiot Matt Isley

would be finding it in the morning and thinking he'd got another clue!" Miss Parrish accepted her retrieved tresses, and coiling the long switch about her head she turned in the direction of the house. "I'm going to bed—no, I guess I can go as far as the music-room without any escort, at my age!—and if I hear that either of you have breathed a word of this—!"

They watched her gaunt, attenuated figure till it was swallowed up in the darkness, and then Peterby said with an attempt at lightness which he was far from feeling: "Well, we made a nice mess of that, didn't we? What's next, Doc?"

"Home. I guess Hannah's right—we're a precious pair of fools!" The doctor laughed, but there was an unusual constraint in his kindly tones. "If the constable did see anybody last night it must have been that Luigi, as you said, and he won't come again."

They found Matt Isley seated on the lowest step of the terrace stairs, fast asleep, and roused him to say that they were tired of waiting for his apparition to manifest itself; but once in the car a silence fell between them very different from that in which they had started out. In the glow of the dashlight Dr. Oakes' face looked troubled, almost stunned, and Peterby was reluctant to express his thoughts to his companion, who was a lifelong friend of the woman they had so unwittingly seized, but they gained conviction in his mind with every passing moment.

Miss Parrish had lied. When Peterby pulled the coil of false hair from where it had caught on the hedge he had looked up. The branch of the tree which

according to her story had torn it from her head was a good four feet to the right, nearer the gate, and there was no wind to have blown it to the place where it hung. How it came to be there he did not try to conjecture, but not in search of that, he was morally certain, had Miss Parrish thrust her groping hand through the hedge. She was a woman who made a creed of uncompromising and frequently painful truth; why had she deviated from it now?

Dr. Oakes realized it, too; Peterby knew it, but he felt that this was a possible phase of the case which would never be discussed between them. Meanwhile the constraint was becoming unendurable, and at length he voiced a thought which had come to him earlier, during his perusal of the evening paper. "Doc, if you haven't any particular plan in mind for tomorrow, how about my running up to town again and going to the undertaking parlors, where Mrs. Leigh's body is to lie in state?"

"What on earth for?" The suggestion effectually roused the doctor from his own thoughts.

"Well, there'll be a mob, of course; it's the first time on record that the victim of a murder has been on public view, I imagine, unless it was a member of royalty or ruler of a country, and the place will be thronged from the moment the doors are opened; but among all the morbid sightseers there are bound to be also the people who knew her—everybody who ever knew her," Peterby repeated significantly. "I've got a good description of the man Leeds, and he's our strongest suspect now, it seems; except for Cesare, of

course, and the police are on the lookout for him. Whether Leeds knows anything of the actual murder or not I've got a hunch he'll be there if he's within miles, and I propose to spot him and follow where he goes!"

"So you're a psychologist, too, Cornelius!" The odd quizzical look had crept into the doctor's eyes, but he spoke with labored enthusiasm. "It's a mighty good notion; but suppose Leeds should take a chance —he'll know if he has any sense that there'll be detectives watching every one in the line filing past the casket—and you follow him, what are you going to do with him?"

"Face him and get the truth!" Peterby retorted stoutly. "If he won't talk I'll kidnap him in a taxi and bring him out here. Failing that, rather than lose him, I'll turn him over to the police; but he won't let it go as far as that, we may be sure, for even if he's got an alibi that can't be shaken, that anonymous letter would mean trouble for him. Of course, if you've any other suggestions to offer—"

"I haven't!" the doctor interrupted hastily as they drew in at the opened gates before the bungalow. "I'll come in for a minute and write an order that will give you a good seat where you can see the face of each person as they approach, and cut in the line to follow whenever you want to, but you may have a long wait, for the body is to lie in state until noon on Monday."

"I'll follow it to the grave and camp beside it if necessary!" declared Peterby, as he led the way to

the library after they alighted. "Make that letter as strong as you can, Doc! I've a feeling in my bones that something will come of it!"

But after Dr. Oakes had written and gone, the other sat for long in his chair watching the glowing embers of the dying fire on the hearth. The doctor had not believed in the result of this new effort, and Peterby had to admit to himself that it was only a slim chance; but he had welcomed it and paved the way. Was it to get rid of his deputy, for a day or two at least? Had the encounter of that evening suggested a fresh possibility, all the more alarming because it was so vague, that he wanted to sift for himself without any one being the wiser?

It was absurd, of course, to think that Miss Parrish or any other of the neighbors in Edenvale could actually know anything of the murder itself, but why had that austere spinster taken it upon herself to lurk about the victim's grounds, and what had she been so obviously searching for?

Peterby went to bed none the more enlightened for his reflections, but he set his alarm clock for five and in the morning tumbled out before the dawn. That would be the most propitious hour, he had decided, to search a portion of that hedge for himself. At night it would have been well-nigh hopeless, and in broad day the presence of a corps of reporters would make it inadvisable, to say the least. Now no one would be in evidence but the constable and the sheriff's deputies, and they doubtless asleep after their vigil. Upon one thing he was resolved; whatever it

was Miss Parrish had hoped to find, he meant to secure it first.

He drove his car along a broad back road which brought him out beyond Ivy Terrace, obviating the necessity of passing Rose Acre. Parking it in an adjacent lane he proceeded on foot to the estate of the murdered woman. Constable Matt Isley was asleep again on the terrace steps, a greasy lunchbox beside him containing the remains of a nocturnal repast; and a recumbent figure on the second terrace revealed the burly outlines of Ben Coleburn. Of Sim Attell there was no sign, and Peterby concluded that he too was slumbering somewhere in the shelter of the garage walls. Creeping cautiously upward in the deeper shadows beside the hedge, to avoid the espionage of any of the sheriff's possibly more-alert deputies from other parts of the grounds, he reached the gate.

There began a painstaking search of every inch of the thicket while the east changed from rose to gold; but the branches were intertwined in a fine network and the dense growth of leaves rendered the hedge almost impregnable against the thrust of his short, plump fingers. He had proceeded only a few feet upward toward the ascent of the terrace when the sun rose over the low, rolling hills, and marking the place with a stick driven deep into the soft turf he abandoned his efforts for that hour and returned to his car.

The seven-o'clock train bore him to the city, and although the doors of the chapel connected with the famous undertaker's establishment where Alma D'Al-

malli was to receive the last homage of the world were not to open till ten, Peterby found the street thronged and police reserves already drawn up in a strong cordon to preserve order.

He showed his letter to the first of these guardians of the peace and was promptly passed through the lines by successive others till he reached the office, where he was taken in charge and conducted to the chapel itself. It was dim and cool and tranquilly, solemnly quiet; and Peterby's first impression was of a multitude of tapers and candles like stars, and a vast profusion of flowers: mammoth wreaths and crosses of lilies, roses, and violets; pillars, gates ajar, and harps of palest pink and lavender and white; and here and there a shadowy figure moving slowly, or immobile. Then he became aware of a broad aisle marked by purple ribbons which led to an open space before the altar, where, with tall candles at head and foot, a high, narrow mound of purest white roses with the soft blurr of violets in its center awaited the arrival of the final earthly audience. He walked slowly down its length beside the official and paused a moment to gaze down at the face of D'Almalli, serenely beautiful, with its classic features composed in enduring calm.

The infatuation which for a brief space had agitated the peaceful routine of his days was utterly gone with his disillusionment, but revulsion against the thought of the crime in all its horror and naked brutality filled him anew, and he turned away with his resolve more firmly fixed than ever to leave no stone unturned in the effort to find her murderer.

The official placed a chair for him, half-screened by a huge floral piece beyond the head of the casket, where the light of the tall wax tapers would shine full on the face of each person who bent above it; but Peterby did not at once avail himself of it. Instead he wandered about examining the funeral offerings and the cards attached to them. There were hosts of names he had never heard and many vaguely familiar as being celebrated in the world of art and music, but of those he knew to have been associated with her only Kroll the impresario was represented by the blanket of roses and violets which covered the casket itself. Quite by chance, half hidden by a more pretentious set piece, he came upon a soft pillow of white violets and valley lilies, with a plain card attached on which was written in a girlish scrawl: "From Rosalie."

So the girl had not forgotten her idol! She must be more entranced than ever, now that Mrs. Leigh's identity had been revealed; and the tragedy would raise her to martyrdom in Rosalie's passionately loyal eyes. Would she live on in the impossible dream fostered by the older woman, or turn back to Jim Masters content to become the wife of Edenvale's next mayor?

Jim Masters! Peterby returned to the chair placed for him and seated himself heavily. Where had Jim kept himself since the murder? It seemed odd that he had not been in evidence in this affair which had shaken the village to its foundations. All at once the memory returned to him of that scene in the rose garden when he had returned from escorting Mrs. Leigh

to her home and found the young man in a jealous, despairing fury.

"This isn't just a quarrel, it's the end of everything I'd hoped for and planned and the beginning for Rosalie of a life that's going to bring her only misery. . . . That woman is the cause of it, and I could trample her under my feet!"

That was what he had said before he flung himself off. Where had he gone? Who had seen him since? Peterby contemplated the flower-decked casket before him, and a phrase uttered by the woman lying there only a few short hours before her death flashed across his mind.

"I fancy he thinks I am a dangerous influence . . . dangerous to his own interests, I mean. Did you see his face tonight? I believe he would almost have killed me if he could!"

A queer chill passed through Peterby's stout frame, but he had no time to pursue the train of thought further, for there was a concerted movement among the other watchers scattered about, the doors were thrown open, and the first of an unending line streamed slowly into the chapel, like a thin but unstemmed flow of living lava. Men and women of all ages and conditions, apparently; Latins and Saxons, Scandinavians and Slavs interspersed with the keen, composite faces of modern America. They filed past in a bewildering array of types, and Peterby found himself studying them keenly, fascinated by the changing play of expressions. Curiosity, morbid eagerness, shrinking horror, emotional excitability, were all displayed in a

revealing flash when each paused for a moment beside the opening in the casket and then passed on; but there was no sorrow, no personal grief.

The scene began to irritate Peterby and stir within him a dull resentment. This was not homage, not even reverence for the dead! It was a hideous exhibition, a mockery! Alma D'Almalli was helpless to resent this exposure to the sordid gaze of an uncaring world. He felt his gorge rising beyond control, when all at once his attention crystallized in a figure approaching in the line, and he forgot all else.

It was that of a man in the late thirties, blond and slim and dapper, with a small, close-clipped yellow mustache above his cleft chin and yellowish hazel eyes beneath the sharply receding forehead. He glanced about him with almost defiant nonchalance, but Peterby noticed that he was flushing and paling rapidly as if red and white lights were playing alternately upon him in the candles' steady glow.

His handsome face, weak, but shrewd, whitened again as he paused in turn and with a palpable effort lowered his eyes to the quiet countenance serenely upturned beneath the glass slide in the casket. As he did so Peterby saw a muscle twitch violently in his temple, and it seemed that for an instant his mustache lifted at the corners in a faint, ironic smile.

The next moment he had turned away, following his predecessor toward the exit, but immediately behind him a rotund figure had slipped into the line and was close at his heels when he emerged upon the street. Peterby had found his man!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CLAIMANT

DR. OAKES had just finished his belated midday meal and reëntered his office when rapid steps spurned the gravel of the path outside and Peterby bounded up on the porch, opening the door without regard to formality.

"Did he get here yet?" he demanded.

"He? Who?" the doctor asked. "The sheriff and Creech looked in this morning, both of them up a tree and demanding that I hold the inquest at once—so that they can eliminate me, of course, and have a clear field for future operations! No one else has come."

"I 'phoned that attorney, Mitchell, in your name and ordered him to come to you here at once, but I was delayed afterward myself, and missed a train." Peterby relaxed with a sigh into the nearest chair and reached for his cigar-case. "I was afraid he'd have gotten here ahead of me; and I couldn't 'phone about it so you would understand."

"What do you want to see him for?—Thanks, I'll try my pipe instead, Cornelius." The doctor waved the cigar away and produced his well-colored meerschaum. "I thought you were going to watch—"

"I did," Peterby interrupted. "A little over an hour was enough for me, though, and so at half past twelve I 'phoned Mitchell; then I followed somebody

from his office, and had to take the one-twenty instead of twelve-fifty, and drive over from the junction. Who's this? I didn't know that attorney had a car!"

But a car had indeed rolled past the section of road visible through the window and stopped abruptly before the front door; a dignified sedan of discreet olive green, with a sneakily silent engine. In another moment Miss Charlotte had answered the bell, and Mitchell's irascibly quick tones sounded in the hall.

"Come in, Mr. Mitchell." Dr. Oakes hastily crossed the office. "We've been waiting for you."

"I thought it best, to avoid possible newspaper comment, to come in my motor." The attorney paused in the doorway, his shrewd, gray eyes regarding them both. "Good-afternoon, gentleman. It was you, Mr. Peterby, who 'phoned me, I think?"

"Yes." There was a repressed note in Peterby's voice. "Sorry to have interrupted your conference, Mr. Mitchell, but the doctor wants to hear about it."

"My conference?" The attorney frowned and his heavy jaw set. "I'm afraid I have no information for Dr. Oakes that would in any way aid his investigation—"

"He must be the judge of that," Peterby interrupted quickly, while the doctor looked from one to the other of them with a calmly questioning gaze. "A man went straight to you this morning from the undertaker's, where he had viewed Madame D'Almalli's body—the same man who was at a hotel not many miles from here until the morning before the murder took place and who caused an anonymous letter to be sent from

there to Montford Lutrelle telling him where Madame was living and under what name. There has been far too much reticence about minor points in this case which we feel sure you could have cleared up for us had you been so inclined. Who did that man represent himself to be, and why did he go to you?"

Mitchell's rugged face had flushed slightly, and he stepped forward and took the chair which the doctor indicated before he replied.

"I should of course have reported the man's appearance in due course to you, Dr. Oakes, but I preferred to investigate his story quietly first. He is probably the forerunner of several such impostors who may turn up, as always in a case of this sort, where a person of reputed wealth dies leaving no known relatives. This man calls himself Shelby Leeds, and claims to have married Alma O'Malley in Buckeye Center, Ohio, ten years ago. I needn't add that he alleges this woman was Madame D'Almalli."

The doctor turned slowly and looked at Peterby, who made an inarticulate sound in his throat. Then the former spoke for the first time since his greeting: "What further particulars did he give you, Mr. Mitchell?"

"His story is preposterous, of course, but he asserts that he met his wife when she was working as a—ahah!—clerk in a village store; he was a road salesman for a tinware concern and married her after a few days' courtship, taking her to Chicago. I gathered"—the attorney coughed behind his hand—"that the marriage was an unhappy one almost from the

start, and when it was discovered that his wife possessed a voice of astounding merit she left him after a few months. He appears to have made no particular effort to locate her, and he declares that only by chance he saw a newspaper photograph some two years ago of the new opera singer who was astonishing European audiences, and recognized his wife. He claims to have written her repeatedly but received no reply, and then came the news of her sudden collapse.

"Leeds is quite candid in admitting that he didn't bother about her then; he says his only object in trying to approach her was to make 'some business arrangement' whereby freedom could be restored to them both. I think we can understand that."

"If we're not idiots," Peterby exclaimed. "Extortion, of course, and during this last year blackmail! But hold on; there's no sense in beating about the bush. We've got reason to believe that Mrs. Leigh —D'Almalli—contemplated the possibility of matrimony; she couldn't go on forever paying him to keep out of her way, and that would mean that she—she was actually prepared to commit bigamy, which of course is out of the question. Did he tell you how he finally located her?"

"He asserts that he learned of her whereabouts only yesterday when the papers printed her photograph and the announcement of her identity; he went this morning to view her body in order to make sure before he came to me and instituted his claim." Mitchell paused. "He has a marriage certificate and a small, faded, snapshot of the woman he married, so

blurred that it is quite impossible to tell whether it is Madame D'Almalli or not. I do not credit it for a moment, even though there is a certain euphonistic similarity in the names."

"What are you going to do about it?" asked the doctor.

"I have already acted," Mitchell responded with dignity. "Before leaving in my motor I despatched a confidential man to Buckeye Center, and from there he will follow the trail to Chicago. Leeds has during the past year opened real-estate offices of his own, after acting as a salesman in one for some years, and I am having another man look him up. In the event that his claim should stand he will become sole heir, of course, but—ahah!—he will require stronger evidence to prove it than he laid before me today!"

"Why do you care, Mitchell?" Peterby asked suddenly. "Of what interest is it to you who gets your late client's estate, since she left no will?"

The attorney's flush deepened to a purplish hue.

"A mere conscientious desire to preserve it from falling into the hands of impostors!" His tone was choleric. "A question of ethics, Mr. Peterby, nothing more. As I said, there may be several such claimants, and it is my duty to prove or disprove their rights, but all this has nothing to do with your investigation."

"Hasn't it?" Peterby demanded with infinite sarcasm. "After blackmailing her for a year or more—she paid it, too, so the rascal must have had some hold on her!—he called her up on the telephone last week. He gave his name, or at least the first part

of it, 'Shelby,' to the girl up there, and he evidently made some further demands that Mrs. Leigh wouldn't grant, for she heard her say 'no' repeatedly; and Mrs. Leigh was very much upset afterward. He probably threatened to disclose her identity and—spoil whatever her plans might have been for the future, and he carried out part of his threat by putting Lutrelle and then Kroll on her track. We know he lied about discovering her only yesterday from the papers, but his story of being in the real-estate business is true enough, for I followed him this morning from your office to his own—or rather to one with 'Leeds City and Suburban Real Estate Company' gold-lettered on the door. Mrs. Leigh balked at last, she refused his demands; and money was what he was after all the time. If he knew that while she lived he'd never get another cent from her but that dead he would have a chance to claim her estate—! Good heavens, I'm no lawyer, but I'd have made an effort to find out where he was last Wednesday night!"

"I am not investigating Madame D'Almalli's death!" Mitchell retorted and rose. "Dr. Oakes, I will keep you informed of results at the various steps of my investigation and notify you at once if any other claimants appear. I have an important appointment in town, and unless you have any further questions to ask me—"

"Did Leeds mention any relatives of this Alma O'Malley whom he married?" The doctor knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"Only an uncle who I gathered was the town—

ahah!—reprobate." The attorney stood, drawing on his gloves. "He died a month after the marriage. His name was Jabez Speering."

"Did you learn any further particulars?"

"None. My stenographer made shorthand notes of the interview, and a copy will be at your disposal as soon as they are transcribed. Good-afternoon." He bowed to them both, and the doctor followed him to the door, while Peterby relighted his cigar and strolled to the window.

So Leeds, cheap, flashy, weakly good-looking, claimed to have been the husband of the exquisite Mrs. Leigh! She, born O'Malley, working in a hoosier village store! Of all the amazing disclosures that had followed the tragedy none seemed so bizarre, so utterly impossible to believe, as this; and he was still trying to assimilate it when his companion returned.

"What do you think, Cornelius? Seems pretty far-fetched, doesn't it? Mrs. Leigh—well, I can't see her selling calico and suspenders over a counter, can you?" The latter voiced his thoughts and then added reflectively: "Still, for an ambitious country girl a traveling salesman who would take her to the city would be a catch, I suppose; and according to Leeds, his wife outgrew him in a very brief time and went on without him. I'm going to send a wire at once out to Buckeye Center and see what I can find out about Alma O'Malley, and I think I'll run in to town myself this afternoon and have a talk with Leeds."

"You'll have to hurry to catch him before his office

closes, for it's Saturday afternoon, you know," Peterby reminded him. "Will it be all right if I go up to Ivy Terrace and have another look in that attic? No matter how careful a woman is to destroy every evidence of the past—provided she has any reason to—there are bound to be one or two souvenirs she can't bring herself to dispose of, and if you and Mitchell didn't find them it's because they're hidden somewhere apart from the rest."

"Go to it!" The doctor smiled. "It won't tell us whether Leeds killed her or not, but it will be a step on the way if we can prove his claim."

Peterby accompanied the doctor to the telegraph office at the station, and then telephoned for George, his chauffeur gardener, to bring the car down and meet him in front of the post-office. Two doors beyond a swinging sign from a second-story window over the feed-store bore the legend "James Masters, Attorney and Counsellor-at-law"; and on an impulse Peterby climbed the stairs and pushed open the door of the outer office, where an unprepossessing elderly female sat sourly clicking the typewriter keys.

"Mr. Masters in?" He smiled ingratiatingly.

"I'll see, Mr. Peterby." She rose, unexpectedly smiling in return, and proceeded to an inner door which she opened and closed behind her, to emerge in a moment and beckon. "Go right in."

"Hello, Peterby!" Jim Masters looked up with eager expectancy from the desk where an array of legal-looking documents had apparently been spread in hasty profusion. "You've been up to—Rose Acre?"

"No." Peterby stared in surprise as the other's face fell. "I just came from town; went to—er, to see the remains."

"Mrs. Leigh?" Master's lip curled. "Very chivalrous of you! I hear you've turned sleuth, going to run her murderer to earth and all that. Wish you every success, but I have my doubts."

"So has Miss Parrish!" Peterby could not resist the retort. "You two are in the minority, however, not as to my personal ability but as to the ultimate discovery of the guilty man. This thing won't be shelved, Masters. A woman as famous as—as Madame D'Almalli couldn't be brutally murdered and her assailant allowed to go scot-free; the authorities won't dare stop till they've hung it on somebody! How's Miss Rosalie taking it?"

"How should I know?" The young man shrugged. "I haven't seen or heard from her since Wednesday night, and I don't intend to do any running; that's over."

"You young jackass!" Peterby stared. "Don't you know that this is just the time—"

"You said yourself that I was always underfoot and she took me for granted," Masters interrupted wearily. "You know what the result was; now if she wants me, she'll let me know, and if she doesn't I'm through with a losing game."

So Masters had thought at first that he came from her! Peterby eyed the disconsolate young man for a moment and then remarked blandly: "Come to think of it, I'm going out that way this afternoon, and I'll

look in and see how she feels about—about what's happened. Shouldn't wonder if she's beginning to realize that an opera singer's career isn't just what she has bargained for. I'm no cupid's messenger but I can drop a hint that I expect to see you later, to find out what you think of the murder, and then if she needs you, as of course she does, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, but it'll have to come from her." Masters thrust the papers aside and, rising, walked to the window. A pause ensued and then Peterby drew a deep breath.

"Well, that's what I did come here for now, anyway; to find out what you thought of the case. Of course there's that chauffeur and the missing jewelry, but that's out of our hands now, and I don't believe the sheriff or the district attorney's man have gotten much further than Dr. Oakes. Who do you think killed her, Masters?"

"Some of that foreign bunch, I suppose; some one with a motive that goes back long before her appearance here." His tone was indifferent. "Personally, I'm not interested; I don't give a whoop who did it, but I guess I hit the nail on the head when I told you she wasn't the sort of influence that was any asset to —to our community. I'm not defaming the dead, I'm stating facts. Whatever mischief she caused is over and done, and though I'm sorry for her, of course, I can't say that I'm grieving exactly. That sounds callous, I know, but I'm not a hypocrite, and I don't forget what she did to me."

"That's a petty way to look at it," Peterby remon-

strated. "Whether you liked her or not doesn't alter the fact that a murder has been committed here, a crime perpetrated in our township, and as our next mayor you ought to be displaying a little civic interest, at least!"

"I don't know about that!" Masters turned from the window, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. "I don't feel—I'm cold on the whole thing, Peterby, and if it weren't for the friends who've worked for me and the fact that we're in the middle of the campaign, I'd withdraw, cut the game and get out! It's a rotten job, politics, and I've lost all my pep—it's gone out of me, somehow. I'd give my soul to see the last of Edenvale and every one in it!"

He had spoken in the heat of sudden passion, but there was a ring of such desperate desire in the last assertion that Peterby eyed the flushed, working face with astounded concern.

"Good Lord, what's the matter with you? You wouldn't lie down now when you've almost won! You may be hurt about Miss Rosalie, but where's your duty to everybody—the community? I'm surprised at you! Where did you go the other night when you flung off like a fool instead of returning as I told you and making that girl see you weren't her exclusive property?"

"Up to Indian Head Rock. It's the lonesomest place I was ever able to find as a kid when I wanted to think things out; and I stayed there till dawn, but I fought the situation to a standstill in my own mind. I've got to go through with this campaign, and if I'm

elected I'll do my best, but—it's dust and ashes in my mouth!"

"You'll come out of this when Perce Cooley with Gresham back of him gives you a nasty underhand slam, and you'll jump back in the ring with all your fighting blood up again; it's what you need, too, Masters!" Peterby turned to the door and paused. "Don't want to reconsider? No message for Miss Rosalie?"

"None!" Masters' jaw set. "Thanks just the same, but she knows my number."

Peterby's car was waiting before the post-office with George's long legs parked beneath the wheel, and the latter observed: "Sarah told me to say that Miss Parrish had called you up; she said she'd like to see you."

"Miss Parrish?" Peterby paused with one foot on the running-board and regarded George reflectively. What in the world could that sharp-tongued spinster want of him? He was well aware of the fact that his mental rating in her estimation had always been several degrees below zero, and never except for her larger dinners and bridge parties had he been bidden to her house. Could it be about the murder? Did she want to pump him? Aloud he added: "All right, George. Drive me to Red Gables first, and then I'll drop you off at home before going on."

The great iron gates of the ancient estate where Miss Parrish lived in solitude stood wide, and the brick-red, gabled roof which gave it its name showed through the russet yellow of the trees bordering the wide avenue. The mistress of the house came out on

the veranda as the car drew up before it, and she called:

"You had my message then, Mr. Peterby? Nobody seemed to know when you would be at home."

"Nobody does these days, including myself, Miss Parrish," he replied as he shook her extended hand. "I sent for George to meet me with the car, and he told me. Can I be of any service to you?"

"Come into the morning-room." She led the way. "I've had a fire lighted, and Maggie will bring tea. I wanted to talk to you—in confidence."

"Yes? I shall respect it, of course." Peterby's tone was cordial, but he eyed his hostess somewhat warily as he seated himself on the chair to which she had motioned with a peremptory wave of her angular hand.

"Have you seen the Greshams?" she asked abruptly.

"Not since Wednesday evening."

"Rosalie's an hysterical wreck, and Mrs. Gresham is so worried about her that she is almost ill herself. Jim Masters and the girl quarreled that night, and neither of them will send for the other or make the first move; and it's taken all the spirit out of Jim."

"I know," Peterby said. "I saw him just now. I'm afraid there's nothing I can do, Miss Parrish. Lovers' quarrels, you know—"

"I do not know!" she interrupted with dignity. "I have been spared that phase of lunacy, thank heaven! But it isn't only a quarrel, it's more, and there is something you can do, Mr. Peterby; you can persuade the doctor to drop this investigation into the death of the woman we knew as Mrs. Leigh!"

CHAPTER XIX

DEEP WATERS

"ASK Dr. Oakes to drop his investigation!" Peterby repeated incredulously. "My dear Miss Parrish, he's the coroner! He's got to hold his inquest!"

"Of course!" She made a gesture of impatience. "Why doesn't he hold it and get through with it? It's only a matter of form, like writing out a death certificate; then the county authorities will muddle around for a while and that will be the end."

"But—but—" Peterby felt that he was floundering in deep waters. "It's his duty to find out who did it! Why should he drop it? A murder's been committed! Do you mean to say you don't want the guilty man found and punished?"

"Certainly, if it could be done, but it won't be! Mr. Peterby, remember I am speaking in the strictest confidence." Miss Parrish leaned forward, a slight flush burning suddenly on each cheekbone. "I've known Daniel Oakes all my life, and he's scrupulous to a fault, but aside from his regular profession he'll never set the world on fire. He's apt in this case to make a horrible mistake just by jumping to conclusions, and he is stubborn and conscientious enough to force an issue that would be worse than the murder itself!"

"I don't understand," Peterby exclaimed in all sincerity. "How could he make a mistake?"

"By unearthing circumstantial evidence against an innocent person and charging them with the crime!"

"What!" Peterby exploded.

"I know that such circumstantial evidence does exist —strong evidence," Miss Parrish went on quickly. "I know, too, that the person to whom it points is absolutely innocent, but I couldn't prove it in a court of law; and the doctor is so exasperatingly high-principled that he'd deliver his own brother over to blind justice if he thought he'd committed a crime! Now, do you see? I'd like to see that woman's murderer punished, naturally, but I'd rather have the investigation dropped and the wretch go free than have it continued and an innocent person accused. You'll forgive my plain speaking, but Mrs. Leigh wasn't worth it!"

Her sharp voice had sunk with a note of such desperate earnestness that it was robbed of all rancor, but Peterby was disgusted to feel the hot color rising in his own cheeks as he hastily disclaimed:

"Why shouldn't you speak plainly? Perhaps I shall, in my turn, but not just now. Whether Mrs. Leigh was worth it or not seems to me to be beside the question; there's a murderer loose, and if an innocent person were accused it wouldn't be the first time before the real criminal was found. I'm afraid I wouldn't want to persuade the doctor not to carry on even if I could, Miss Parrish, but I don't think there is any danger of what you fear."

"Great heavens, I might have known!" She wrung

her hands together more in aggravation than sorrow. "If you knew what you were talking about—"

"If I knew what you do, I'd probably be searching in that hedge for something, too," he interrupted suddenly, adding without a trace of humor: "It wouldn't be for my back hair, either, any more than you were! That's what I meant when I spoke of plain speaking; you may have fooled Dr. Oakes—I don't know, for we haven't discussed it—but you didn't take me in for a moment. You think there's some evidence there that might incriminate an innocent person, somebody in whom you take an interest; is that it?"

"Stuff and nonsense!" But Miss Parrish's light, wide-set eyes blinked rapidly, and there was a strained note in her tone. "There is a curious fact or two which you and the doctor might misconstrue as circumstantial evidence against some one in whom I—I am interested, but you won't find it in that hedge! Do you wonder now that I'm afraid you two will fall into a disastrous blunder, when you make such a preposterous suggestion merely because my hair caught on that branch!"

"If it had I wouldn't," Peterby replied obscurely as he shook his head. "I hate to doubt the word of a lady, but when the doctor grabbed one of your hands through the hedge and you realized you couldn't get away you raised the other and tore the—the switch, I think you called it, from your head. It was a quick-witted move, but when you threw it over you should have looked up first to see that you were under that branch and not several feet away, for there wasn't any

wind to blow it where I found it. You can keep your own counsel, of course, but you can't blame me, even though you have honored me with your confidence, if I prefer to see justice done no matter what innocent people are for a time placed in an unfortunate light."

His tone was firm and Miss Parrish looked at him with something like reluctant respect dawning in her eyes, but she veiled it instantly.

"Well, I've warned you. If Daniel hits upon this false evidence it's going to put him in a dreadful position, and knowing him, I know he'll choose a course that will bring him lifelong regret. If you're the friend to him that you seem to be, Mr. Peterby, you'll keep him from it at all costs to your own opinion!" She rose, and he noted with a slight touch of amusement how she had begged the question of their last encounter; but when he had left her and his car turned into the New Gideon turnpike the incident faded into insignificance beside the problem which her attitude had raised in his mind.

It was clear, of course, who the innocent person was on whom she feared suspicion might fall. There was only one individual in Edenvale in whom she took a vital interest with all the starved maternal yearning of her spinster soul, and that was the young candidate for mayor Jim Masters.

Her ambition for him was boundless. She had gone into his campaign heart and soul, and she knew that the merest whisper against him in connection with the murder would put an end forever to his political career, even though it were instantly refuted. She

knew, too, the motive which could be alleged, his conviction that Mrs. Leigh's influence and counsel had poisoned the mind of the girl he loved and turned her definitely from him, for he had evidently made no secret of his deadly animosity toward the interloper, but —*did Hannah Parrish believe him innocent, after all?*

The car swerved violently and Peterby dragged it back into the road with a savage twist of his wrist, for with that thought another came to him. Hannah Parrish was loyal to all her friends—was there no one else besides the youthful politician? . . .

Indomitable herself, she admired courage more than anything else, and with her eye-for-an-eye sense of retributive justice it was possible that her sympathies were with the killer. A phrase which she had uttered to Doctor Oakes over the hedge the night before recurred once more:

"Neither you nor any one else, Daniel, will ever find out how that woman came to her death! . . . Cesare . . . never killed her. Enough people had reason to, Heaven knows, but you'll never find out the one who had the courage!"

No one was visible when Peterby arrived at Rose Acre, while his call had now assumed an added definiteness of purpose. Gibbie opened the door in response to his ring, and Peterby thought that her long face looked more lugubrious than ever.

"Is Mrs. Gresham at home," he asked, "and Miss Gresham?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Gresham's lyin' down, but I guess I could find Miss Rosalie."

She led him into the drawing-room, and as he seated himself Peterby glanced again at the woman.

"Mrs. Gresham isn't ill, is she?"

"Well, she won't say so, sir." Gibbie shook her head, sighing. "She's just tired, I guess; she ain't been like herself for the last few days."

"Don't disturb her, then," he said, "I only stopped in for a minute anyway."

He looked about the quiet, tapestry-hung room with its low bowls of tawny and golden chrysanthemums everywhere and thought it the most peaceful in all Edenvale. If its mistress was colorless, almost negative in her habitual self-effacement, she showed a distinct individuality in the appointments of her home. Some women were like that, Peterby reflected; they possessed no initiative beyond their four walls, no desire for self-expression save the primitive instinct for keeping their hearthstones swept and garnished.

"Mother's coming right down, Mr. Peterby." Rosalie interrupted his introspection and placed her hot little hand in his. "You're helping the doctor, aren't you? Hasn't anything been found out yet—anything?"

He saw that her face was still pallid and her eyes deeply encircled, but they flashed as she spoke, and he shook his head.

"Nothing definite, Miss Rosalie. It's only three days, you know, and in a mystery as deep as this—"

"It's an outrage!" she burst out. "I don't believe Cesare did it—she liked him and trusted him more than almost anybody. Oh, if I were a man I wouldn't

just poke around and—and wait for something to turn up; I'd find the murderer and string him up! I don't believe all the dreadful things they say about Madame D'Almalli; she was too wonderful and adorable, and every one is jealous! It drives me crazy whenever I think of it; and I haven't a soul to talk to, for mother won't even let me mention it."

"Well, it doesn't do any good to talk about it," Peterby responded practically. Then he added with a guileless air: "What does Jim Masters think about it?"

"I haven't asked him!" Rosalie tossed her head, but she flushed. "I don't care what he thinks! Somebody ought to do something, Mr. Peterby! I hoped you had come to tell us—"

She paused, biting her lip as her mother entered the room and cast a quick, admonitory glance at her before greeting their guest.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Peterby. Will didn't come straight back from the factory this afternoon, but I expect him any minute. Rosalie dear, will you wait for tea?"

The question was pointed, and the young girl rose.

"No. I'll take Miss Parrish's cape back to her now, and I may stop at Carolyn's, but I'll be home in time for dinner. Good-by, Mr. Peterby; I hope there'll be some news soon."

She added the last with a note of defiance as she departed, and Mrs. Gresham sighed as her eyes followed her daughter.

"Rosalie is taking the shocking death of our poor

neighbor very much to heart, Mr. Peterby; I hope she hasn't been troubling you with questions. She has been so hysterical that I've forbidden her to discuss it, but naturally none of us can think of anything else. Even Miss Parrish is dreadfully upset; she spent last night with us, and we found ourselves talking continually of it. Tell me, do you think the truth will ever be known?"

"I do!" Peterby responded with emphasis but paused as Gibbie entered with the tea-cart, to add as she left the room: "You are the third person I've talked with today who seems to question it, Mrs. Gresham, and it surprises me; there's never been the least doubt in my mind that the murderer would be discovered."

"Then you have an opinion, or at least an inkling?" Mrs. Gresham raised her eyes to his as she passed him his cup. "Perhaps I shouldn't have asked that, though; you're in a sort of official position now, aren't you?"

"A minor one, and only temporarily." Peterby temporized. "There seem to be so many clues that it's a process of weeding them out now, and that's bound to take time. We'll probably find that we've neglected the most significant one of all—that it may have been right under our noses from the start—but we'll hit upon it soon or late; I'm confident of it."

"A neglected clue?" Mrs. Gresham sipped her tea reflectively. "There doesn't seem to me to be any at all, but then perhaps you and the doctor know more than we do."

Peterby eyed his gentle hostess warily. Could it be that she was trying to pump him? Now or never was the moment for him to voice the question, to make the statement he had resolved upon, but he found his tongue tied, his heart failing him. Could he intrude such a monstrous, almost unbelievable thought on the consciousness of the woman before him? It had seemed possible before, even a real inspiration, yet now he felt as if struggling with a nightmare.

"We don't really know anything as yet, but of course there's that chauffeur running off and the jewelry disappearing; that was in the papers this morning—"

"And so you are free to speak of it?" Mrs. Gresham smiled faintly. "I don't know—he may have stolen the jewels, of course, but somehow I can't imagine that he is guilty of the graver crime, though it's the obvious thing to suspect him now. You spoke of another clue that had been neglected from the start—"

"Only of the possibility that it may exist, still neglected," Peterby disclaimed hastily. "I'm just a tyro at criminal investigation, but one reads of such things in big cases sometimes. What does your husband say about it?"

"Oh, I haven't heard Will even hazard a guess. He thinks it's terrible, of course, and that something should be done immediately, but he hasn't any definite idea. He admired Mrs. Leigh greatly, as we all did even before we knew what a wonderful person she was. Has Doctor Dan made up his mind what sort of weapon was used?"

Peterby stirred uneasily in his chair. Mrs. Gre-

sham *was* pumping him, and although her candid gaze held only curiosity and sympathetic interest he felt uncomfortable. Could she share Miss Parrish's apprehension lest some innocent person be accused?

"I suppose that will all come out at the inquest," he replied vaguely. "If the doctor doesn't empanel his jury before the time set for the funeral that will have to be delayed, but I think he's waiting for further evidence still. I must be running on now; just dropped in as I was passing to see how you all were. You were resting when I came; haven't you been feeling well?"

It occurred to him as he spoke that there was a frail look about her he had never noticed before, but then she had always been rather faded and delicate-looking, and now she smiled as she shook her head.

"I'm always all right, but I've been just a little tired lately; it was the heat of this past summer, I think. I'm sorry Will missed you; he must have been detained longer than he expected. I don't suppose any of us will feel much like social gatherings until this mystery has been cleared up or dropped for good, but you must come to us soon for a quiet little dinner."

Peterby promised absently and took his departure, but as he drove away he glanced back. Mrs. Gresham was watching him from the drawing-room and waved to him, but she did not draw back, and he was conscious of her eyes still upon him when he turned in at the place next door.

Only Sim Attell appeared to be on duty now, and he lounged forward as Peterby alighted.

"Constable's home getting some sleep," he announced. "That feller didn't show up again last night, the one that was skulkin' 'round night before; guess he seen it wasn't any use. Sheriff's gone down to have a talk with Doc Oakes—got to git some action pretty soon! What you want, Mist' Peterby?"

"Oh, I'm just going up to the house awhile; the doctor sent me for something he left here the other day."

Peterby was morally certain that he spoke the truth as he left the garrulous Sim and proceeded to the side door on the terrace. He was sure that the doctor and Mitchell too had overlooked in their cursory search some record of Alma Leigh's past other than of her professional experiences; but it would not be with the rest of her papers, and for him to subject the entire house to so minute an examination would be an endless task.

However, an idea had come to him, and when Calliope Griggs appeared in response to his ring he motioned peremptorily toward the library.

"Lopey, Dr. Oakes has discovered that Mrs. Leigh kept some papers here that he wants to see—very private papers. They weren't in those trunks in the attic nor in the wall safe. Now, can you remember ever having seen Mrs. Leigh looking over any such papers that she hid away and didn't want anybody to see?"

The woman considered him thoughtfully for a moment and then shook her head.

"Nossuh, cain't think as evah I see her lookin' oveh no sech a paper. There's a book she done make a terr'bul fuss about but not no paper."

"A book?" Peterby repeated blankly.

"That's what, Mistuh Peterby. It was w'en she fust come and we was onpackin' the books right in this ve'y room." She gestured comprehensively at the tall bookcases. "One o' 'em was big and covered in leather like a photograph albium but with a lock and key to it—leastways Mis' Leigh she must've had the key. I put it up on that shelf there, and Mis' Leigh was real s'prised and excited w'en she seen it, like she didn't know it done got packed up with the rest. She tooken it down, but I didn't see where she hid it then, only she didn't take it out o' the room with her. I nevah did see it ag'in till little while ago—las' week, seems like."

"Last week?" Peterby echoed. "Maybe it's what we're looking for after all. What day last week did you see it?"

"Thursday—day after that Mr. Shell-somethin' done call on the phome. I come in here to dus' and she was sittin' there in that big chair with the book open on her lap, and she tell me quick to go bring her some tea. I went, but I—I foun' somethin' to do in the hall for a minute till she done get up, and then she drop the book down behime the row on that shelf there. Fust chance I got I look at it, but she must've done locked it ag'in. Heah 'tis."

Lopey had gone to the shelf she indicated and returned bearing a huge, imitation-morocco-bound vol-

ume, which she put in the visitor's hands. It was apparently old and scarred, fastened with a tawdry but ornate brass clasp and padlock, and in place of title was stamped in tarnished and worn gilt lettering with the initials: "A.O'M."

"O'M!—O'Malley!" To the vast disappointment of the eagerly curious Lopey, Peterby turned toward the door.

"Dr. Oakes must see this at once. If any one else asks, remember—you never saw this book!"

CHAPTER XX

A MESSAGE FROM THE SHERIFF

PETERBY drove back to the doctor's cottage in a state of suppressed excitement but learned from Miss Charlotte that he had not yet returned from the city.

"The sheriff was here," she volunteered. "He stayed till just a few minutes ago, when they sent word over from his office that New York wanted him on the telephone."

New York! Peterby pondered this as he drove homeward, still sitting on the great flat book with its locked hasp. Could it be the police headquarters which had 'phoned Anse Crofutt? Had they found Cesare?

Back at the bungalow once more, he fastened the library door and placing the book on the hearth he deliberately forced the hasp with the poker. As he had suspected from its fluted top, he discovered it to be a scrap-book, its first few pages evidently newspaper clippings slightly yellowed and frayed, the later ones crisp and fresh.

Peterby was not at all sure that his position as coroner's deputy authorized him to break open the locked record, but he had chanced it and now he read on absorbedly, deaf to Sarah's knocking on the door, until he had reached the last page. Then with eyes

almost starting from his head he stared a long moment at what had been pasted there before closing the book and thrusting it deep under the cushions on the couch.

After a hasty bite of his long-cooled dinner he presented himself again at the little cottage, the scrapbook under his arm, to find that the doctor had returned and was awaiting him with unusual impatience.

"Did you see Leeds?" Peterby demanded before the other could speak. "Did he have an alibi for Wednesday?"

"Yes, and he lied about where he was that night; I disproved his story, and that's what delayed me; but I don't believe it matters now," Dr. Oakes replied hurriedly. "Come on, every minute's precious. We're racing now against death!"

"Death," Peterby exclaimed, and then thrust out the scrapbook. "Here, put this where it'll be safe till we get back; who's dying?"

"Luigi D'Annibale, our friend with the scar." Without noticing the forced lock on the volume the doctor thrust it into a drawer of his desk and then hurried his friend toward the door. "We've just time perhaps—"

"Luigi!" Peterby gasped but trotted along valiantly. "How was he hurt? Who sent for you? Has he got news of Cesare?"

"Anse Crofutt 'phoned just now from Belgrade Hospital and said he wanted me to hear Luigi's antemortem statement. Of course you're in on it too, Cornelius, but I don't think Anse was any too anxious

to have us, only that it would be a little too serious for him to withhold from me now. Cesare's dead."

"Great heavens, what was it? Some accident they both got into?"

"More likely a brawl of some sort, but Anse didn't tell me; just said the police had sent for him and I'd better come if I wanted to hear what Luigi had to say before he passed away. There's our train pulling out, think you can make it?"

Peterby saved his breath for the sprint and scrambled up the rear platform behind his friend just in the nick of time. The smoker was well-filled, and they had opportunity for only a half-smothered remark or two before they reached the terminal and took a taxi to the hospital.

Sheriff Anse Crofutt met them in the wide, quiet corridor outside the ward with its antiseptic reek and the shadowy figures of nurses gliding noiselessly about.

"He's sleeping now, doped." The sheriff's lean cheeks were flushed with excitement, and his angular hands worked nervously. "The doctors say he'll wake up pretty soon now, though, and then it'll be just before the end. I don't guess they'll let Mr. Peterby in."

He eyed the coroner's deputy with small favor, but Dr. Oakes said firmly:

"There won't be any objection, I'll see to that. What's the matter with Luigi? Did somebody try to murder him? You said that chauffeur Cesare was dead?"

"I just identified him in the morgue; he's got four

long, thin knife stabs in the back and one in the throat that the assistant medical examiner says was made by a dago thing called a stiletto—same as this Luigi's got, only his are in the body, two of them. He's bleeding inside of him, somewhere, and there ain't no ways of stopping it," the sheriff replied with gloomy relish. "The two of them were found in a vacant lot somewhere up in the Bronx, and it looks as if they were taken there in an automobile. Maybe they were stabbed first, or else they fought together after they got out; but there wasn't any knife found, though the detectives told me there were enough guns on 'em for an arsenal."

"But the jewelry!" Dr. Oakes spoke hurriedly but in the same subdued tone as the sheriff, with a cautious glance at the half-opened door. "Those rings and things that disappeared—"

"Cesare had them, all right, but just one of 'em was found on his body. The police have got it now, but they showed it to me and I've seen it more than once on Mrs. Leigh's hand—I can't get that other name of hers 'round my tongue. Maybe you remember it, Doc; it was that ring with a square, red stone and something that looked like a crown carved into it."

"I remember." The doctor nodded, and Peterby uttered a low exclamation. "Was Cesare already dead when the police found them?"

"Dead as a doornail but still warm. They claim that they ain't got a word out of this Luigi, either; but his name was in his hat, and I guess he's the

feller you saw in the train Thursday night all right, Peterby, for he's got a scar running clean from his ear to his nose. I guess he's awake now."

A white-coated surgeon had issued from the door followed by a plainclothes man; and Anse Crofutt introduced the coroner, who promptly brought forward his deputy.

"Mr. Peterby and I interviewed the dead man Cesare Salerno together; and he was the only one who saw and can identity Luigi D'Annibale," Dr. Oakes explained. "Is he conscious yet?"

"Yes, but I should advise you to be as brief as you can, Doctor," responded the surgeon. "I'll brace him all I can, but it's only a matter of minutes now."

"If you get him to open his mouth you'll be lucky," the plainclothes man remarked disgustedly to Peterby as the two physicians drew aside for a moment and then beckoned. "His kind don't squeal; they figure that if they don't get out to settle their own battles their folks or the gang will croak the guys that got them."

Peterby shuddered.

"Were you one of the men who found them in the vacant lot?" he asked. "Do you think they stabbed each other?"

"Not a chance! The two of them was done in first and planted there. Now, is this the fellow you lamped in the train the other night?"

They had followed Anse Crofutt and the two physicians to the screened-off corner of the ward, and

Peterby started slightly as his eyes fell upon the oily, close-cropped black head on the pillow. The face was livid now instead of sallow, but the scar stood out unmistakably, and as the heavy lids lifted weakly he saw a quick, veiled recognition in the feverish eyes.

He murmured an assent, and then Dr. Oakes advanced to the bed.

"Cesare is dead, Luigi. Did you know that?" His tone was stern and resonant, with a compelling quality in it that Peterby had never heard there before; but the eyes which had transferred their gaze to his gave no sign of response, and the pale lips did not move.

"He was your friend, but Tony and Alfio—do you know what they say? They have sent word to the police that you and Cesare killed Madame D'Almalli."

For an instant now Luigi's eyes fairly blazed. Then the fierce light faded, but although he stared with added intensity no words came.

"Cesare took Madame's jewels, but she does not need them now; and it is nothing beside the fact that she was killed. We don't think Cesare did that, but if you will not speak we will have to believe that he did." The doctor paused, and then as if gathering himself for a supreme effort he added: "He was your friend, your brother! If he did not kill the woman will you speak and prove him innocent?"

There was silence, and then at last, slowly, the pallid half-sneering lips moved.

"Cesare did not-a keel!" The voice was so faint that it barely reached the listeners grouped about the bed. "He not-a know till they call-a heem in da morn.

I read in da pape dat afternoon, and dat night I t'ink-a I go see Cesare. He's a-gone."

The voice stopped with a whistling sigh, and the hospital doctor bent hastily forward with a glass in his hand. Peterby noticed now that behind one of the screens so turned as to be invisible from the head of the bed a nurse stood as if waiting until she should be summoned, and beside her a young man sat taking notes rapidly.

The doctor straightened and stepped back, and for a time Luigi lay with closed eyes, but gradually a trace of color crept into his waxen cheeks and he stirred.

"You went out to see Cesare Thursday night late, Luigi?" Dr. Oakes prompted him. "He was gone. Had he left no word for you? What did you do?"

"Cesare ees not-a een hees room, but lot-a peop'—cops—dey all a-roun'. I go away, walk-a 'long da road five mile, maybe ten. Some guys, dey come by een a car, dey geev-a me da lif' back to da citee."

"Who were they?" the doctor asked.

"Dey not-a know me, I not-a know dem." Luigi's lips closed, but a sly look crept into his eyes.

"When did Cesare come? How do you know he didn't hear of Madame's death till they called him in the morning?" the doctor persisted but still in a gentle, gravely friendly tone.

"I read what he say in da pape'. He not-a come."

The voice was growing fainter once more, and the trace of color had faded, giving place to a mounting gray shadow. Peterby grew restive; why did the doctor evade the issue, ask nothing further about the

jewels? This man had been found with Cesare's body beside him; would he be allowed to die and tell nothing further?

He glanced at the house surgeon, but the latter made a gesture of helplessness. Clearly that stimulating dose could not be repeated, and there was a rasping stertorous note now in Luigi's short, panting breath.

"When did you come back from Boston?" Dr. Oakes bent over and wiped the fast-gathering sweat from the dying man's forehead.

"Not-a Boston. My sist'—mak-a da mistake." The failing voice was a mere harsh whisper.

"Where were you since yesterday morning, Luigi? How did you come to be in that vacant lot uptown where they found you—you and Cesare?"

With a spurt of strength Luigi lifted his head from his pillow.

"I veesit—good-a frien'. Tak-a da walk, meet-a Cesare. We tak' t'ree step, four, den some guys come 'long we not-a know. Dey get-a fresh, we fight, dey geev-a da stab wid da stilett'. Den we run an'—we fall-a down. Dunno not'ing more. Cesare, he not-a keel-a Madonna!"

"Who were those men who stabbed you!" Dr. Oakes' voice suddenly rang out in command. "You know them, Luigi! You will die with a lie on your soul! Was it Tony? Was it Alfio?"

But Luigi merely stared up at him in silence, although his eyes seemed to smile until the lids slowly closed over them, and his head sank gently back and

into his pillow. One rattling gasp gurgled in his throat, and then there was nothing more until his eyes opened once again, fixed and glassy and sightless.

The house surgeon advanced a step and laid his fingers on the gaunt wrist. Then he turned to the others.

"It's all over, gentlemen; he's gone."

"By Godfrey, you got him going, though," the plain-clothes man exclaimed admiringly to the doctor out in the corridor once more. "I've given wops like that the third degree from the minute they were brought in till they croaked and never got a word out of them! The Edenvale case is yours, but these two murders are on our blotter, and maybe you'll pass us the good word about this Tony and Alfio? Your sheriff here says they were pals of Cesare's and used to visit him out there, together with Luigi. What else do you know about them?"

"Only that Alfio Salerno disappeared from his lodgings around eight o'clock Thursday night with Tony Mastiorocca who had come to warn him, and Luigi was supposed to have left for Boston that morning." Dr. Oakes added such further details as he could recall and finished: "I suppose theories are out of order, but I think there's no doubt that they were all four of them in a gang. Cesare, alone or with the aid of one or more of the rest, burgled Madame D'Almalli's safe and took the jewels, and Cesare and Luigi were stabbed in a fight over the division of the spoils. Just what connection any or all of them had with the

woman's death I'm not prepared just now to say; but I'll be glad to know if you lay your hands on Tony and Alfio."

The sheriff returned to Edenvale with his two fellow townsmen, but he had little to say during the long wait for the late train. In the smoker he asked at last:

"What do you think, Doc, honestly? Cesare's out of our reach now, and so's Luigi, while the other two may never be heard of again. Do you think they killed Mrs. Leigh?"

"It isn't what I think, Anse, so much as what the jury'll decide at the inquest. I'm calling it for Monday morning, first thing, and as soon as I get my jury picked I'm going to hurry 'em to the city to view the body, so that the funeral can take place; then I'll bring 'em back and give 'em all the evidence I've got," Dr. Oakes replied gravely. "After that, it'll be up to you. If you ask me right now, I can't say that it looks like anybody but Cesare."

Peterby maintained a discreet silence, but he eyed his friend in surprise. Save that the chauffeur had actually been in possession of the stolen jewels, they had learned nothing else that pointed to him as the possible murderer, and he knew that the doctor had not been sanguine of establishing his guilt before. To be sure, he hadn't thought Shelby Leeds' false alibi as worthy of much consideration one way or another; and there were no further suspects, unless perhaps he had fallen upon that circumstantial evidence of which Miss Parrish had spoken.

At the station a surprise awaited them in the person of the constable. He was gulping down the last remnants of a hot frankfurter and roll purchased from the lunch-wagon beside the platform, and his round, ruddy countenance was distorted with excitement.

"Hey, caught him!" He fairly pranced. "Got him, Sheriff, trying to climb in the liberry winder; and Ben Coleburn 'most shot him!"

"Got who?" the sheriff demanded. "Where is he?"

"The feller who's been hangin' 'round Ivy Terrace every night since the murder," replied Matt Isley exultantly. "He's over in the lock-up now."

Without a word to his erstwhile companions the sheriff strode across the street in the direction of the village jail, but Dr. Oakes seized Matt's arm.

"What's he look like, Matt? Is he dark and foreign?"

"Dark nothin'! Looks like a dude soda clerk, with yeller hair and mustache and a real smart rig-out. He ain't said nothin', but maybe he will now. Lemme go!"

The constable tore his arm free and dashed off as fast as his plump legs would carry him, and the doctor and Peterby stared at each other. It was the latter who voiced the name in both their thoughts:

"Shelby Leeds!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE LOCKED BOOK

"THEN if it's Leeds we'd better get right over to the jail too, as quick as we can!" Dr. Oakes exclaimed. "He must have been pretty desperate about something or other to come down here tonight and try to force an entry into the home of the woman he claims was his wife!"

"By George, I'd forgotten!" To the other's astonishment Peterby chuckled. "If it isn't Leeds that would-be burglar will keep, and if it is there's something over in your house you ought to see before you talk to him again."

"In my house?" The doctor stared.

"Yes. Do you remember I gave you a big book to keep safe when we started for the city tonight after you got the sheriff's message? I'd stolen it from Ivy Terrace myself only this afternoon, and if I'm not mighty mistaken that's what Leeds must have been after now. When you see it you'll understand."

"Come, then!" Dr. Oakes turned and led the way. "A book? What on earth should he want a book for? I thought Mitchell and I had gone over everything thoroughly except one or two trunks that seemed to be filled with opera costumes and wigs."

Peterby did not enlighten him, and when they

reached the little office the doctor turned up the light, which was always left burning at night, and hurried to the desk.

"Why, the book's got a padlock on it!" He turned to his friend.

"Yes. Mrs. Leigh must have had a key somewhere, for she opened it only last week, but I twisted the hasp off at home this evening. Notice the initials?"

Dr. Oakes glanced at the tarnished lettering and exclaimed as Peterby had mentally done:

"O'Malley! Then Leeds' story was true!"

"Read it!" Peterby was still chuckling. "It gets more interesting toward the last!"

The doctor dropped into a chair by the table, and for some minutes there was no sound but the rustle of the leaves, stiff with stale and crackling paste. Then at last he spoke.

"Well, this proves, as far as newspaper clippings can, that one Shelby Leeds married Alma O'Malley in Buckeye Center, Ohio, ten years ago; and the girl according to the village scribe had a phenomenal voice. That and the fact that Alma Leigh preserved these clippings all these years would seem corroborative evidence that they are one and the same, but it isn't proof any more than we have proof that the man calling himself 'Leeds' is the same as the one mentioned in these engagement and wedding notices."

"Eh?" Peterby's smile faded.

"The man telephoned Mrs. Leigh, but did he ever come to see her? Have they met face to face, at least here at Edenvale? If your supposition is correct that

he came here tonight to get possession of this in order to strengthen his case—"

"I thought you hadn't read to the end," Peterby interrupted. "He didn't, Doc. He wanted it so that the case he's trying to prove wouldn't be squashed flat!"

"What?" The doctor hastily thumbed the pages. "The earlier items are all about social gatherings at which Alma O'Malley 'obliged,' with the usual flowery encomiums; and then the engagement notices, as I said, and the marriage, with the announcement that they would live in Chicago—good Lord! So this is what you meant!"

He was staring at the final pasted entry even as Peterby had stared several hours before. Then he ruffled the remaining blank pages and closed the book with a slam.

"The confounded rascal! He wanted to destroy this, of course! Come on; we'll go over to the jail, and if Leeds is the man they've got there we'll put him through a little third degree of our own!"

They found the sheriff deep in consultation with the constable in the office attached to the small, seldom-occupied building that adjoined the former's home, and the doctor asked:

"Got your burglar safe, Anse? Did he tell you his name?"

The sheriff's expression of reluctance at the coroner's ubiquitous presence turned to one of truculence at sight of his companion.

"What if I have, Doc? He's mine and the con-

stable's, I reckon, and he's got nothing to do with your end of the investigation."

"Then you didn't get anything out of him? I thought as much." Dr. Oakes smiled quietly. "Any objection to our seeing him, just to renew old acquaintance?"

"Acquaintance?" Anse Crofutt repeated sharply.

"Yes. Unless I'm very much mistaken he's the fellow Peterby went in town to see this morning—or rather yesterday, for the church bells will be ringing in a few hours—and I had a pretty good talk with him in the afternoon. But of course Mrs. Leigh knew him best of all, having been married to him."

"Do you mean to say he's Leigh?" The sheriff started up. "Come, then. I must say, Doc, you could have kept your word more thoroughly about working in with me than you have!"

"It was all Peterby's doing; he found the man in the first place," the doctor remarked with generous candor as they followed their guide along the passageway to a stout oak door at the end. "Didn't know you wanted to coöperate with my deputy, Anse."

"I'd coöperate with the devil himself—not meaning you, Peterby—if I could get a line on this murder!" The sheriff threw open the door. "This your man, Doc?"

One glance at the slim, dapper man with yellowish hair and sharply receding forehead as he rose precipitately from the cot where he had been seated in forlorn dejection, showed Peterby that it was indeed the same individual who not long ago had smiled down

ironically at Alma Leigh's dead face in her coffin, and at the same moment the doctor stepped forward.

"Well, Leeds, it's a surprise to see you here! Why didn't you tell me when I interviewed you what you wanted from your wife's house? I might have saved you this little inconvenience."

Leeds shrugged, and his small blond moustache lifted in a sneer.

"No inconvenience, I assure you, Dr. Oakes! I guess there's no law against a man's getting into his wife's house—his own house, by right of inheritance—and you admit now that the woman who called herself 'Leigh' here was my wife! That'll save Mitchell a lot of bother."

"Oh, yes!" The doctor's tone was still affable. "You wanted the additional proof of the marriage that she had, didn't you? It's all here, in this scrapbook. There'll be no trouble in the world in proving that she was the woman Alma O'Malley who married you ten years ago out in Ohio."

"Then will you tell these hicks to let me go?" Leeds drew himself up to his insignificant height and turned with a snarl on the two local officials. "You're sensible enough to see that it's going to bring them nothing but a big laugh in the papers!"

Matt Isley started forward with a growl, and the pear with which he had been regaling himself in the sheriff's office slipped from his fat fingers. His superior was watching Dr. Oakes, however; and the latter shook his head.

"I'm sensible enough to see a lot of things, Leeds,

especially a kind of a shifty look in a fellow's eyes when he's lying to me. Then I generally take the trouble to prove up on what he says. Barring the nuisance you are to the sheriff I guess it's a good thing you'll be safe here till you make up your mind to tell us where you really were on Wednesday night."

"So that's it, is it? Say, I know a little about the law myself. It's up to you to prove me guilty if you're cracked enough to think I killed Alma, not me to show you I ain't! It's none of your business where I was, and if you want to know find out for yourselves! I'll make you all sweat for this when it's over!"

"I expect you will," Dr. Oakes agreed equably. "When it's all over and you get out of prison after your term for fraud and conspiracy, to say nothing of blackmail and extortion, I guess maybe you'll come on back to Edenvale and prosecute the constable here for false arrest."

"Fraud!—Blackmail!" The man's weak, cleft chin dropped, and a look of apprehension came into his feline eyes. "What are you trying to start now?"

"Nothing. To finish it, instead!" The doctor spoke with sudden sternness and contempt. "You've blackmailed Alma D'Almalli, as her legal name is, for the past year and more, and got about forty-thousand dollars out of her because she didn't want her social chances here spoiled by having it known that she was once the wife of a cheap skate like you! You extorted this money from her under threats, as we can prove by witnesses you didn't know about. So much for that, and as to the conspiracy— Well, your representa-

tions to Mitchell yesterday morning were taken down in shorthand—"

"What of it?" Leeds interrupted furiously. "The woman was my wife—you said so yourself, you've got proof there!"

"That she *was,* yes, but not at the time of her death nor for five years before that!" Dr. Oakes opened the big, shabby book.

"That's a lie!" Leeds shouted hoarsely. "I was a fool for taking up with a village gawk, but I married her all straight—"

"And she divorced you five years ago in Little Rock; here's her decree."

The doctor pointed to the last document pasted in the book, and as the sheriff and constable crowded up to glance over his shoulder the man before them started back.

"Divorced—" he mumbled. "I never heard of it, I never knew! That's no divorce, for I wasn't even served! I can get it set aside—"

"I expected that, but it won't hold water," the doctor interrupted again contemptuously. "You were defended by a lawyer named Crymp, who was afterward disbarred. Here are two clippings about it on the previous page. You've played a pretty long shot, Leeds, and you've lost; that's why you took a chance on getting caught at attempted burglary tonight. When you telephoned to Alma D'Almalli last week and she refused to be blackmailed any further you threatened her with mild scandal at first and gave her till Tuesday to pay up. When she didn't you got

the chambermaid at the Mansion House to write that Lutrelle note for you, and then the next morning you telephoned to Kroll yourself. You thought if these two started to annoy her and her identity became known she'd realize you were in earnest and would give you more hush-money before you came here and scandalized the neighborhood by announcing yourself as her husband, ex or otherwise. Wednesday night you came to see her—"

"I didn't!" There was a desperately dogged note in the prisoner's voice, and it rose with a touch of fear. "I never laid eyes on her from—well, from one time out west years ago till I saw her accidentally soon after she came back to America last year, just as I told Mitchell; and I never did see her again! It wasn't a crime to tell Lutrelle and Kroll where she was, and after that I—I tended to my own business! I didn't go near her, I tell you!"

"It won't do." Dr. Oakes turned to the sheriff. "This man claims that on Wednesday night he went to a theater and then to a chop house for supper with two men, both of whom I interviewed. One had kicked Leeds out of his house two months ago, the other knows him but pretends not to; and each of them proved an alibi for that night. On the other hand, the night clerk, porter, and elevator boy in the hotel where Leeds lives all declare that he came in at half past three on Thursday morning with muddy clothes and in a very excited state—so much so that they thought he'd been drinking. He goes on the stand under oath at the inquest, and these five men

follow him with their testimony. Think you can keep him safe till then?"

"I had been drinking!" Leeds cried in the sudden falsetto of hysteria. "I'd been in the country, too, but not near here, and with a crowd of fellows who could prove it quick enough only it would mean jail for them; and then the whole lot of them would be down on me! I'd get mine for it sooner or later. I don't dare talk, I tell you!"

Peterby and the doctor exchanged a swift glance, and Anse Crofutt remarked:

"So real estate ain't your only line, like you told me when I first tried to talk to you, eh? Maybe you're in a gang with some Italians—"

"Italians, nothing!" Leeds interrupted. "They're all good enough fellows and making big money—club stewards and roadhouse-keepers. We chartered a schooner together, and she came in Wednesday night, standing off the Jersey coast. We went down in a flock of cars to bring the stuff from the small boats back to the city, and we—we celebrated a little. That's all I'm going to tell you, and I can't prove it; but I had nothing to do with Alma's murder, so help me, God!"

He sank down on the side of his cot with his face buried in his hands, and the sheriff rubbed his chin reflectively.

"Bootlegging, hey? It's a pretty good excuse to think up quick, and if it ain't I guess we can c'nect up on it. If you had nothin' to do with the killing, maybe you've got an idee who had?"

"Not the least in the world!" Leeds' hands dropped, and he stared before him in sullen helplessness. "I never knew a thing about Alma's life except newspaper talk from the day she left me in Chicago nearly ten years ago; and if it wasn't that chauffeur of hers that I've been reading about, I don't know what to think. I didn't care, either, only that it put an end to—to our business arrangements; I was glad enough when she ran away from me, and I wouldn't have taken her back if she had the voice of an angel, for she was a she devil underneath; but I'd never have killed her. I'd married her in good faith, though, and I had a right to what she left behind her. That's why I went to her lawyer today. I haven't a suspicion as to who did take her life, I swear it!"

His head drooped forward again on his breast, and Dr. Oakes motioned quickly to the others and turned to the door. A faint gray light was stealing in at the office window when he and Peterby took leave of the sheriff and Matt and started for the little, old, yellow house before which the deputy's car was parked once more.

"It's been a long day, Cornelius." The doctor yawned wearily. "We're at the start of another one, and the Lord knows what it will bring! If this new alibi of Leeds' holds good—and I'll get the names of his associates out of him by afternoon—we'll be back again at the beginning!"

"I'd like to see him throw something," Peterby observed irrelevantly.

His companion stopped short in the path.

"Of all things! Throw what?"

"Anything! Know those knife-throwers in the circus? That kind of thing, I mean. If he was going to stab anybody, I wonder if he'd hold the knife with the blade sticking out from the back of his palm and his thumb pointed toward his body as he drew his arm up to strike? That's the only way that funny, gouging blow could have been given to Mrs. Leigh so that the curved blade would jab downward into her heart; I've been thinking that over." Peterby spoke absently as if to himself. "Next to finding the weapon itself, we've got to find a person who would normally strike that way."

"And the curve of the blade would have to be downward or it would make only a glancing, superficial wound," the doctor exclaimed. "The murderer must have made sure of that beforehand, held the knife carefully, planned that deathblow down to the last detail. But great Scott, Cornelius, that argues the coldest-blooded, most deliberate fiend on earth!"

"Not necessarily." Peterby shook his head. "Cold-blooded and deliberate if you like, but it doesn't follow that it was a fiend. What if it were some one with a perverted but sincere sense of—justice?"

CHAPTER XXII

PETERBY MAKES A FIND

TAKING leave of the doctor without elucidation of his cryptic remark Peterby climbed into his car and made off again to Ivy Terrace, where he repeated his search of the previous dawn, beginning where he had driven the stake in the ground and proceeding several yards farther up the slope. The guards were gone and there was no sign of life about the house, but when the full day came, cloudy and blustering with a raw autumnal wind, smoke began to curl from the chimneys, and the garage door opened to reveal the gardener, Lon Corwin.

Dodging hastily along a level of the terrace to the central steps in order to avoid him, Peterby had no time to drive a second stake marking his fruitless progress but hurried to his car waiting in the lane and returned to his own bungalow.

It was midday when he awakened, and at the breakfast table Sarah responded glumly to his "good-morning" as she placed soup and fruit before him.

"Take your choice, Mr. Peterby," she remarked. "I didn't know whether to make this breakfast or lunch, so it's a mixture of both. I can't think what's got into the doctor, keeping you out till all hours when he's always talking about living regular."

"How did you know I was with the doctor, Sarah?"

Peterby asked indulgently, for the elderly maid had been for years the devoted mistress of his bachelor household.

"Because he telephoned an hour ago; but you didn't leave any word to be waked up, so I used my own judgment," Sarah replied firmly. "He just wanted to leave a message, anyway; said to tell you he'd been sent for over to the jail and now he was going to town. If he don't get back till late tonight, he wants you at Mrs. Leigh's house early tomorrow morning for the inquest. And I'm sure I hope then'll be the end of it!"

She finished with a toss of her head and disappeared into the pantry, and Peterby frowned. Doc Oakes had meant to convey that Leeds had weakened and told the names of his fellow bootleggers and now the doctor himself was on the way to verify the story. He evidently anticipated a protracted search, since he might not return until the small hours again, and his deputy felt lost.

The jury tomorrow would bring in an open verdict of death at the hands of a person unknown, of course, and what then? Was the murder of Mrs. Leigh to go forever unsolved?

He wandered about the house in a very fever of unrest, for the paper held nothing new beyond the finding of the dead and dying Italians in the vacant lot and the discovery upon one of them of a ring belonging to the murdered woman, though one and all took it for granted that Cesare had killed his employer.

Had he? With the jewels in his possession had he gone with seemingly no purpose to the front of the house, to be discovered by Mrs. Leigh on the terrace, and driven a knife into her heart instead of making good his escape? Had Leeds killed her in order to claim her property fraudulently, realizing she would no longer submit to blackmail? Was it Lutrelle or Kroll, each with bitter hatred in his heart and alibis which the doctor had said might be "shot full of holes"? Had his thought of yesterday been true, and was it some one else, some one whom the breath of suspicion had never touched, whose motive was undreamed-of? Did there indeed exist a clue, as he himself had remarked to Mrs. Gresham, which they had neglected from the first and which yet might lead them to a solution beyond their wildest imaginings?

The rain having held off all day came with a rising gale at nightfall, and Peterby sat for long over a blazing fire in the library waiting in momentary hope of a call from the doctor, but none came, and he went to bed at last in no very amiable frame of mind.

In the morning with the first faint lightening of the sky he was up and out in his car, heading once more for Ivy Terrace and a final search of the hedge. He would not admit to himself what he hoped to find there, but this would be his last opportunity, and he determined to continue until the start of the inquest if need be, careless now of who saw him.

The rain had ceased and the clouds were rapidly being dispelled before the coming of the sun, but its first rays were not yet visible over the tops of the

rolling hills, and the wind was raw and chill. Many leaves had fallen during the storm; he could feel them dense and slippery beneath his feet, and here and there an almost naked branch stood out starkly against the graying sky as he left his car in its accustomed spot in the lane and approached the terrace steps.

Then he glanced toward Rose Acre and paused, for through the trees a single light glimmered forth from a second-story window like a weary but watchful eye. Could Mrs. Gresham or Rosalie be ill? Gross, healthy William Gresham would be snoring now, Peterby knew, insensible to the atmosphere of brooding suspense which he himself, phlegmatic and practical as he was, felt to be still hanging over this house of tragic mystery.

With a shrug he mounted the steps to the topmost level of the terrace, decided to start there and work his way downward, since he had no means of telling where he had left off on the preceding morning, but the bench upon which he had sat with Alma Leigh loomed a vague, grayish shape before him, and slowly his feet were drawn to it.

There Kroll the impresario had waited for her earlier, and there he must have returned later; there, too, at the low concrete wall just in front of it she had stood and waved to Peterby himself in that last living glimpse of her he had had in the moonlight!

He shuddered and forced his thoughts resolutely to another consideration. It was straight down there, in a direct line from the end of the bench by which he stood and at a descent of three or four levels of

the terrace that he had seen her body lying on Thursday morning as if she had been flung backward over that low rail. Flung backward, or fallen?

She must have been standing just where he was now but facing the other way; had she reeled backward when that hideously curved knife pierced her heart and hung with upturned breast for a moment balanced over the wall, long enough for her assailant to withdraw the weapon? If then she had swayed or been thrust downward what would have been her murderer's next move? Would he have fled with the reeking knife still in his hands, or in instinctive horror or desire to be rid of it would he have flung it from him first?

He would scarcely have, as Dr. Oakes remarked, "had nerve to stop and worry it out of her breast" if in the next minute he lost that nerve and flung it after her or at a tangent into the hedge. For it was the weapon that Peterby now acknowledged to himself he was looking for, the weapon that he suspected Miss Parrish had hoped to find when she used her friendship for the Greshams as a subterfuge to spend Friday night at their home next door and slip out to pursue her search. Whether she had absolute knowledge of its sinister presence or merely a lurking fear he would not permit himself to conjecture; the mental processes of the murderer alone interested him for the moment.

If then the knife had not been flung after the body nor into the hedge but was still in the right hand of the assailant to be cast aside as he turned, where would it have fallen? Peterby pivoted slowly to the left, in

the direction of the gate in the hedge and the place where Miss Parrish had been so precipitately seized, and he described an arc with his right arm much as a pitcher practicing a curve, but with his hand held palm toward his body and thumb upward, curled about an imaginary knife-handle.

There would have been something almost comic in the aspect of that rotund figure gyrating solemnly on the terrace in the misty dawn had any one been there to see, but save for that one light gleaming from Rose Acre all the world seemed waiting with veiled face for what the coming day would bring, and no one beheld Peterby's eyes follow the gesture of his arm and travel beyond, continuing the imaginary arc of an object thrown from that curiously postured hand—follow, and then become fixed, widening in amazement and dawning excitement.

For his gaze had fallen upon the fountain! The fountain which on that Wednesday night had jetted a sparkling mist into the luminous air, but which now appeared a mere deeply-ringed basin let into the concrete floor of the terrace, its small statue drooping in pathetic isolation!

Lon Corwin the gardener had shut it off, of course, but had he drained and cleaned it? Peterby felt the sweat start out upon his forehead in spite of the sharp wind, and he advanced toward it step by step in the fast-brightening dawn.

The light was strong enough now for him to see that the water had seeped away, all save a few inches of rain perhaps, the residue of the storm just past,

and its surface was covered with floating leaves blown from the cluster of trees at the corner of the house or the vines which climbed its walls.

Kneeling, he reached over the edge and plunged his hands down into the chill slime, feeling about, but he could not quite touch the bottom, and the sun was coming fast. Rising, he stepped over and down into the depths of the basin, grasping at its edge and at the statue itself as he slipped and slid before regaining his balance, heedless of the icy water which splashed halfway to his immaculately clad knees.

There Peterby halted for a moment and then began cautiously to shuffle his feet about, striving to feel every inch of the bottom. It would have been more sensible, perhaps, to report his idea to Dr. Oakes and have the fountain cleaned in his presence, but Peterby felt that if there was a discovery to be made here he wanted to keep it to himself for a time at least; and then, too, if this idle train of supposition should prove to be abortive he would not look like an utter fool.

Suddenly he stopped, his jaw dropping and vacant eyes fairly protruding from his head, for he had struck something! It was something hard and curved that slipped beneath his tread, but he clamped his foot down firmly upon it and, stooping, gingerly picked it up.

It was a knife, and Peterby almost dropped it when he saw that he was holding it by the blade—a short, strong blade of even width and thickness that was curved from its sharp tip in a quarter-circle to the straight black wooden handle!

He transferred it hastily to his other hand, and while he stood regarding it the sun peered suddenly over the top of a distant hill, its long ray pointing like an accusing finger at the rusted, discolored scoop-like weapon, turning the drops of water which trickled from it as scarlet as living blood!

Ten minutes later, as Dr. Oakes in his little roadster turned into the New Gideon turnpike, he all but collided with Peterby's wildly careening car with the owner, pale and bleared of eye, crouched behind the wheel.

"Hey, Cornelius! Where have you been? What's the matter with you?"

At the hail Peterby came to a halt so precipitately that his bulk alone kept him from catapulting through the windshield, and with a grunt he turned and surveyed his astonished friend, who had pulled up and was backing.

"Oh, it's you, Doc!" he exclaimed superfluously when they were abreast. "I was going to your house as soon as I'd got into some dry things! Want to ask a favor of you!"

"Dry things! I should think you ought to!" The doctor eyed his sodden, mud-spattered trouser-legs. "What on earth have you been doing, wading in that pond beyond Ivy Terrace?"

"No, I haven't," Peterby retorted, inwardly glad that it was the literal truth. "You're not starting the inquest now, are you? It can't be nine o'clock yet!"

"Nine? Cornelius, have you lost your wits? It isn't seven!" The doctor was still staring, but an odd

note had come into his tones. "I've had a hurry call to a patient out this way, that's all. What have you been up to?"

"Nothing much, but I've got a notion I'd like to verify and I'll have to run up to town for an hour to do it. That's the favor I wanted to ask of you; you're not going to call me as a witness early in the proceedings, are you? All the testimony your jury will expect from me is about my last talk with Mrs. Leigh and—and what we've done since, isn't it?"

"Yes. I've got to get my jury and take them to the city myself to view the body before I call any witnesses, you know; and your testimony will only be in the nature of the general routine. I won't get around to you till some time in the afternoon, anyway." The doctor paused and then added: "You say all the testimony the jury 'will expect'; will there be more that they don't expect? Have you got something up your sleeve?"

"Just a notion, but I don't know what it is," Peterby responded incoherently. "Maybe it'll mean a lot or—or nothing. I'll tell you all about it in the noon recess. You'll be back yourself from town then?"

"Of course. It won't take long to get a jury together with no suspect that any one has any personal sympathy for and everybody in the countryside ready and anxious to serve. I'll load them on the ten-forty and just file them past the casket, so the funeral can take place as near the scheduled time as possible. I've got to hurry on to my patient! You're bound to keep that 'notion' to yourself till you've worked it out, I

suppose, and I won't urge you. Get a change of clothes quick and a drink of ginger, Cornelius. Good luck to you!"

With a smile and a wave of his hand he was off down the road, and Peterby drove on reddening with shame at the deception practiced on his old friend, but he felt that he must follow this clue to the end alone.

His errand proved longer and more difficult of accomplishment than he had anticipated, and it was well past noon when Peterby emerged from a shop doorway with an oblong parcel in his hand and mechanically hailed a taxi to take him to the station for home.

His quest had succeeded. That monstrous idea which had come to him was proved to be the truth, and with it had come a vast enlightenment, but triumph brought with it no exultation; rather his face was more gravely, deeply troubled than since the first shock of the tragedy, and there was an oddly stunned expression in his eyes.

With the knowledge he had sought there had come, in a swift flash of memory, the clue which had been for so long neglected; the chance phrase in a long sentence uttered by a woman in his own presence not an hour after the body of Alma D'Almalli had been discovered. With it came also the revelation of the motive, and his heart was like lead within him.

For his duty was plain, and although the most difficult task of his life lay before Cornelius Peterby no thought of compromise or evasion entered his mind. Dr. Oakes must be told!

CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN TWILIGHT FELL

IT was two o'clock when Peterby drove up to Ivy Terrace once more, but to his surprise in place of the horde of vehicles he had expected to find thronging the road and the crowd from city and countryside that should have surged up and down the long flight of steps, the vicinity was deserted, the shades of the house drawn down, and only Matt, patrolling the gate and pensively eating crumbs of cake from his empty lunchbox, appeared in view.

"Matt! Where is everybody?" Peterby called, drawing up by the side of the road. "Didn't Dr. Oakes get back from the city with his jury yet?"

"Yep, but the inquest's adjourned till tomorrer," the constable responded, closing the lunchbox and coming forward. "Doc lined up his jury—he could have got six!—before ten o'clock and took the whole mob with him, but when he got back around noon he said he'd have to wait for further evidence from you; and he put the proceedings off till morning."

"Further evidence from me!" Peterby repeated. Was that why the doctor had let him go so easily after that chance meeting? Did he suspect what his deputy had discovered and where it was to lead?

"That's the reason he give, 'cause a coroner can't put off an inquest for private business; but somebody's

mighty sick." Matt offered the explanation in a pompously instructive tone, then jerked his fat thumb in the direction of Rose Acre.

"The Greshams!" Peterby exclaimed. That solitary light which he had seen in the window, the doctor's hurry call at dawn—why hadn't he thought! "Is it little Miss Rosalie?"

"Nope, it's Mrs. Gresham herself. She had kind of a faintin' spell in the night. Doc's there now, and he says soon's you show up you're to go there and wait till he can come down and talk to you."

Before the words were fairly out Peterby had turned the car and started back to the place next door, and as he swerved up the driveway he saw Dr. Oakes' roadster parked before the veranda. He must have seen it from the road, but in his astonishment at the desertion of Ivy Terrace it had made no conscious impression upon him.

He mounted the steps, but before his hand could reach the bell the door swung open and Rosalie seized his arm in both her hands and drew him in. With her small face white and tear-streaked and her golden hair flying in disorder about her ears, she seemed like a woebegone child; but there was a ring of mature suffering in her subdued, trembling tones.

"Come into the drawing-room, Mr. Peterby. Doctor Dan told me to expect you, and I've been watching. I feel as if I could die, too!"

It had been almost her expression in the first shock of hearing of Mrs. Leigh's death, and Peterby was startled.

"But your mother isn't going to die, my dear! The doctor will soon have her all right again," he found himself saying mechanically as he followed her into the drawing-room. "Just what is it that seems to be the trouble? I heard that Mrs. Gresham fainted during the night—"

"She hasn't been well for days, but she wouldn't complain; and she's always been such a dear, unselfish darling that we—we didn't pay any attention!" Rosalie wrung her hands. "I don't know what did happen, it was all so confused! Mother kept a light burning in her room, but she's done that so much lately that I didn't think anything about it till just before morning Gibbie screamed, and I woke up. She was bending over mother, who lay on the floor with a funny, bluish look on her face! I screamed, too, and father came, and then they got mother back into bed. She hadn't fainted, she was conscious but terribly weak, and just smiled and whispered to us not to worry but to send for Doctor Dan; that he knew."

"Well, perhaps it's some little trouble he's been treating her for, child, and not so serious as you think." Peterby patted her shoulder. "How is your mother now?"

"I don't know!" Rosalie's voice broke into a low wail. "Miss Parrish is with her and the doctor and Gibbie, but they won't let me in, and father has locked himself in his room! I don't think it's fair! Nobody tells me anything!"

She turned appealingly to Peterby.

"Well, it can't be so very bad or the doctor would

have stayed here all day," Peterby remarked consolingly.

"No, he came at dawn when father sent for him, and when he left mother was resting easily, but she got awfully weak again at noon, and father went down to wait at the station for the doctor to get back from the city with the jury. Mother won't let any specialists be called in; she says she only wants Doctor Dan! Oh, Mr. Peterby, if anything happens to her! I've been horrid, I haven't half appreciated how wonderful she was! Ever since Mrs.—Madame D'Almalli came I thought she was the—the only person alive that was worth while, but now—"

"Rosalie!" Miss Parrish's sharp tones sounded from the doorway. "If you can spare a few minutes from telling your own troubles perhaps you'll go down to the kitchen and help Gibbie fix something for your mother. The cook is useless, as usual, and I have a message for Mr. Peterby!"

"Oh, is mother better?" Rosalie cried quiveringly. "Can I see her?"

Miss Parrish's eyes softened for a moment.

"She's resting. I guess you can go in after a while but not just yet," she replied. "We've all got to be patient, Rosalie."

"Oh, I know! Of course I'll be patient; I'll do anything if only she gets well!"

The girl ran out of the room, and Miss Parrish closed the door softly but with an air of definite purpose that made Peterby quail. He did not look up as she came and stood before him.

"Mr. Peterby, why are you here?"

"Dr. Oakes left word for me," Peterby mumbled uncomfortably. "He wanted me to come here and wait till he could talk to me."

"You have found it, then—the circumstantial evidence I warned you against." For the first time in their long acquaintance he heard a note of pleading in her tone. "Daniel doesn't know it yet, I could tell; I watched him to see. He knows there's something but not— Mr. Peterby, I tried to convince you that this evidence would seem conclusive but wasn't, that it was absolutely false and would lead to terrible trouble. Don't tell Daniel!"

"Miss Parrish, I must!" Peterby rose and faced her squarely. "If what I've learned could be disproved —if I could believe you when you say it is misleading, if I could fool myself into thinking that you even believed it yourself—I would give anything to have it so. You know and I know that a human life has been taken, and although we might almost condone it the law doesn't. You are a woman, and you put your own prejudices and inclinations above abstract justice, but it must be served if only to protect other innocent people whose lives might be ruined by a false accusation. Dr. Oakes must know the truth!"

"You fool!" Miss Parrish clasped her angular hands convulsively. "That woman deserved to die! That was when justice was done! There is sickness here in this house, and all Daniel's skill and undivided attention will be necessary to fight it! If you have any regard for decency, for humanity, take your miserable

tale home with you and wait until tomorrow. If my word has any weight with you, I can assure you that the person you suspect will not run away! Go, and leave us to care for Mrs. Gresham in peace!"

Peterby shook his head.

"I appreciate the situation, and I am deeply sorry. I would not intrude here now, but it is by the doctor's command and I am his deputy. I won't disturb any one, and Mrs. Gresham needn't know that I am here. Is it really so very serious?"

"It's her heart." Miss Parrish shrugged. "Nobody even suspected it, and though I noticed that she wasn't like herself the last few days I thought she was worried over Rosalie's hysteria about the murder. There's nothing more to be said and I must get back to her. Daniel knows you are here, and I suppose he'll come to you when he can."

She left him abruptly in characteristic fashion, and Peterby seated himself again. The house was very still, and the minutes lengthened into an hour, then two, but no one came.

Should he take Miss Parrish's advice and go? What business had he here, after all? Every diffident instinct urged him to leave; but the nature of his information for the doctor was as imperative as life and death itself, and so he lingered while the sun sank low in the west and the shadows gathered, creeping toward him.

At last the door opened, and Dr. Oakes stood before him. Peterby uttered a low exclamation and, rising, started forward, for the change in his friend

since their morning encounter was marked. It was not so much the signs of fatigue, of the crisis through which he appeared to be grimly fighting his way, as it was the stricken look in his kindly eyes.

"Great heavens!" Peterby gasped. "It isn't as bad as that! I knew Mrs. Gresham was seriously ill, but it can't be that her life is actually in danger! You look as I've seen you when you came from a deathbed, Doc! Mrs. Gresham isn't going to die!"

"She knows you are here, and she would like to see you for a minute if you will come, Cornelius." The doctor spoke in a level monotone.

"To see me," Peterby cried. "What on earth—"

"She says it is about something you and she talked of when you called on Saturday, something important that she'd like to tell you," Dr. Oakes went on. "Be careful; she hasn't any too much strength."

He turned to lead the way upstairs, but Peterby stopped him.

"You knew—you expected this illness?" he asked. "Rosalie told me when she admitted me that her mother in sending for you this morning said that you would know; and when I met you hurrying here you didn't tell me who your patient was, but one day—only last week it was—you said that you had just sentenced a patient to death. Doc, was it Mrs. Gresham? I wouldn't ask, but I've got to know now! It makes a—a terrific difference in everything!"

The doctor eyed his flushed, earnest face and then nodded slowly.

"Yes, Cornelius, it was Mrs. Gresham. You re-

member I told you that it came as a shock to me; I never dreamed there was anything wrong until I discovered that aneurism, for she hasn't required any medical attention since Rosalie was born. I had to tell her—she's the kind to whom the truth is only merciful—but it broke me all up, for I've known her all her life! She had a month or two, possibly three under normal conditions, but something seems to have given way—she won't fight. Will you come now? I've sent for young Jim Masters; she asked it."

"Jim Masters!" Peterby repeated, as one in a daze. "Yes, I'll come, of course."

The house was broodingly silent as they made their way upstairs, and Miss Parrish met them on the threshold of an opened door. It was the same room as that from which the solitary light had shown out before the dawn, Peterby noticed, and then as they entered the middle-aged spinster caught his eye with a burning question in her own.

As clearly as if she had spoken he read it: had he told Dr. Oakes? Peterby shook his head reassuringly, and then she murmured:

"Mrs. Gresham should not be allowed to talk and waste her strength! I've tried to stop it, but I can't; so please—please remember that her mind isn't quite clear, her thoughts are wandering and she doesn't know—"

"Don't whisper—Hannah!" Mrs. Gresham's voice came in a soft gasp from the bed. "Come in. I haven't much time."

At the doctor's gesture Peterby slowly advanced to the side of the bed and touched the waxen hand lying quietly on the coverlet.

"Dear Mrs. Gresham, I am sorry to see you so ill," he began, but at the slight movement of her pale lips he stopped.

"Thank you, but it is—best, after all. I want you—to know the truth as well as Hannah and Dan, for I think you have guessed. I—am going to speak first of my husband as he is—as he has always been. It is no disloyalty now—at the end. Dan, could I sit up—a little higher?"

Dr. Oakes bent forward raising the slender figure, and Miss Parrish slipped another pillow beneath the shoulders. Peterby felt a strange inability to move, as if he were looking in upon a scene in which he had no part; he could only wait tensely for what was coming.

"Hannah thought I had no pride, because I suffered —everything." The soft voice went on, but stronger now, "I couldn't make her understand that after the first shock it just didn't matter; nothing did, except Rosalie! It wasn't a question of forgiving Will for his unfaithfulness—one doesn't forgive death, and it was just as if Will had died and only the memory of him has lived on in this house all these years. But Rosalie was everything, always, and I only lived for her happiness. As she grew up I watched for signs of her father's faults in her, watched as if for a trace of some horrible inherited disease, but she was just all

youth and fire and high spirits, with underneath the qualities that will make of her a strong and happy woman.

"When Jim Masters began coming I was so glad! That was what I had wanted for her most, the love and companionship of a good man, and when I saw that she cared for him, it was worth all that I had endured. Then—then Mrs. Leigh appeared, and I was afraid."

She paused, passing her hand across her forehead, and when it fell again at her side Dr. Oakes' fingers touched her wrist lightly for a moment; then, reassured, he sat back in his chair, and Mrs. Gresham glanced at Hannah Parrish.

"You know, Hannah, you watched it all these months just as I did, although we've never spoken openly of it until—the other night. Gradually Mrs. Leigh was winning Rosalie away, not only from me but from all the simple things, the fundamental things of life. I said that Rosalie would be a strong woman some day, and so she will, but she isn't now; and after all her father's blood is in her, reckless, pleasure-loving, irresponsible! Until strength comes to fight her weakness she will be in danger from herself; but I hoped her love for Jim would outweigh the ambitions Mrs. Leigh was fostering in her mind, preying on her natural egotism to gain a hold on her and through her reach Will.

"Don't misunderstand me now, please! I was no more jealous of my husband with her than I would have been of a tombstone. I knew, of course, that she

would have married him for his money and position, but that could never be, for I would never divorce him on Rosalie's account. I never dreamed that I could be taken and my daughter left to her mercies, but gradually I came to know that the pain I had been fighting so long at my heart was growing worse and I had better make sure of the future.

"On Wednesday, Rosalie's birthday, I went to Dan, and he told me the truth; I had at best only a few weeks, a month or two; and even while I stood there in his office I knew what I must do. I must kill Mrs. Leigh!"

Peterby's breath caught in his throat with a gulp, and he glanced across the bed at the doctor who sat stunned, as if a blow had suddenly fallen upon him; but Hannah Parrish bent forward fiercely.

"Nellie, stop! You shan't go on! You don't know what you are saying!"

Mrs. Gresham smiled at her wanly.

"Dear Hannah! You know it is the truth, and I must speak! Don't try to stop me; I must finish before the darkness comes." Her eyes, which Peterby had always thought so dull and bovine, turned toward the window where the early dusk was falling, and he saw that they glowed with an ethereal light. "You all heard Rosalie's outburst that night at dinner, about studying abroad to be a great singer; and you heard how I tried to reason with her, to show her that she had not the qualifications in character as well as voice, but the poison had struck in too deep. She would go; I knew that, too. When I was taken, in so short a

time, she would win her father over; and then in a few years what would life hold for her, a bitter disillusioned woman or—or worse! I felt again that Mrs. Leigh must go before I did; but it didn't come home to me so forcibly until after dinner when my husband and Mrs. Leigh were alone on the balcony outside the music-room. I slipped out there to call them for bridge, and—he was holding her in his arms! I heard him say: 'To realize what it was that would have meant everything—too late! To hold it for a moment as I am holding you and then to have to let it slip from one's grasp!'

"I gasped a little, for the pain had come again; but I slipped back into the music-room before they knew I had been there. As clearly as if it were written before me I knew that he would marry her, but that didn't matter except in so far as it would affect Rosalie; and that woman's influence mustn't be allowed to ruin her! I must get rid of Mrs. Leigh now, at once; for I had only a little while to live myself afterward, and I must have that time to counteract her ascendancy over my child!

"All during the bridge and after I was planning, planning, trying to find a way! I was too weak physically to strangle or smother her or strike her down with a blow. I hadn't any poison or means of making her take it, no gun even if I had known how to shoot. There was only stabbing left, and I didn't want to—to butcher or mutilate her, but to pierce her heart!

"This must sound horrible to you, but it didn't seem to me she was a human being; it was just that she was

a living menace that must be destroyed before she destroyed my daughter's happiness. Long after the party had broken up and the house was still I paced my room thinking, thinking! The only weapon possible to me would be some simple household thing, and, throwing a cloak about me, I crept down to the kitchen to see what I could find."

A shuddering exclamation forced its way from the doctor's lips, but he kept his eyes fixed upon her in an affectionate, encouraging gaze, and she seemed to gather strength from it.

"I came on it at last; a little, curved knife for cutting grapefruit, and only that morning Larry had sharpened it for the cook till it had a point as keen as a dagger. I tried it once or twice in the empty air to see how I must hold it to strike so that it would curve in deep, and then I slipped out through the rose-garden.

"I meant to get into her house through the library window, to steal upstairs and kill her while she slept; but when I came through the little gate in the hedge I saw her standing alone on the terrace above. She saw me and called, but I motioned to her to wait where she was; and when I came up face to face with her I told her what I was going to do and why, and then —I struck!"

The slender body writhed suddenly on the bed, with both hands clutching her heart as if it were itself pierced by a knife-thrust; and Dr. Oakes hastily thrust some medicine between the teeth clamped in agony. When the paroxysm passed, however, it was Miss

Parrish who tenderly wiped her brow and murmured:

"You see? Between us we are killing you!"

"No; but I—I have only a few minutes more. When I drove that knife into her breast she fell back across the terrace wall, and somehow I twisted the blade free and turning flung it as far from me as I could, I don't know where! My one thought was that Rosalie mustn't suffer all her life from the disgrace of having her own mother branded a murderess; and I couldn't bear the thought of being separated from her in prison during these last remaining weeks—there was so much left that I must teach her! I don't know how I got home; but I glanced at the clock in my room—it was only twenty minutes past one! It had been just one o'clock when I stole out of the kitchen—only twenty minutes, and now Rosalie was safe from that woman's influence forever!

"There isn't much more. I made up my mind to act as if that hour had never been, as if I had slept like every one else through my neighbor's death; and every moment since I played a part except for one hour on Friday night, and then Hannah found me out!"

"Hannah!" The doctor, startled, turned to her. "You—when we caught you!"

"Yes!" She nodded grimly. "Let Nellie save her strength for a minute since she's bound to have it all told. We've both known her since she was a baby; but a woman's apt to see more than a man, Daniel, and—I suspected the truth. That's why I came straight here as soon as I heard of the murder, to

stick by her, and why I invited myself to sleep here Friday night. I didn't sleep much—I saw her slip out, and I followed her. She was hunting in the hedge for something, and then you grabbed her hand from the other side of it."

"Her hand!" Peterby found his voice at last. "But it was you—"

"It was I you fell upon, yes! Until that minute Nellie didn't dream that I suspected the truth or that I was there; but when she was grasped like that I rushed up and wrenched her free, pointing toward the house and sticking my own hand through the hedge where Daniel grabbed it thinking it was the same. I put up my other hand and tore off the switch from my head just as you thought, Mr. Peterby; but Nellie was safe indoors, and I fooled you both for the minute. Then I returned to her, and she told me everything! The thought of that knife had almost driven her crazy; for any woman used to housekeeping would have known what it was, and the cook had missed theirs and might identify it if it was found. Nellie felt she couldn't rest till she'd found it herself and buried it somewhere, and though she didn't know where she'd thrown it she thought it must be in the hedge."

"It wasn't." Peterby touched his pocket significantly, fearing to produce the weapon before the dying woman's eyes. "It fell into the fountain, and I found it there at dawn today. I had to go to town to find out what it was, and then I knew the truth."

"How dark it's growing," Mrs. Gresham sighed. "I can't see anything now but the white blur of your

faces and outside just—shadows. I've told you everything, and there is just one desire I have left in all the world—don't let Rosalie know the truth!"

The others glanced at each other, for though twilight had fallen it was still softly luminous, the garden without still clear and distinct in the delicate gray light, and everything in the room was plainly visible.

"Rosalie won't know!" Miss Parrish promised with firm determination. "Nobody shall ever hear the truth but we three, for you've told Daniel yourself, and he's bound by professional confidence; and my word would be as good as Cornelius Peterby's, any day, if his conscience starts working! No word of this shall pass beyond these walls; and I'll look out for Rosalie, Nellie. She'll be contented and happy with Jim yet!"

"Hannah!" Mrs. Gresham stretched out her thin arms and the doctor and Peterby turned aside, but after a moment they heard Miss Parrish murmur:

"Shall I send her to you now—Rosalie? She's been crazy to see you all day, and you'll want to talk with her before you rest."

"I shall rest—now, in just a little while. Send her to me, Hannah, and Jim too, if he has come; but no one else, you understand? I am too—tired!"

Peterby glanced back from the doorway. Nellie Gresham was lying very quietly on her pillows, as if her task was done; but from the shadows of coming dissolution upon her face there gleamed forth the light of an almost fanatical mother love, enduring, eternal.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE NEGLECTED CLUE

THREE nights later Dr. Oakes and his erstwhile deputy Cornelius Peterby dined at Red Gables with Miss Parrish. It had been a quiet little dinner, simple and perfectly served; and now they were gathered about the hearth-fire in the morning-room, the two men smoking and their hostess knitting a diminutive red sweater for one of her innumerable protégées in the poor district.

They had sedulously avoided all reference during the meal to the theme uppermost in all their thoughts, but now Hannah Parrish came to the point with characteristic abruptness.

"Let's get it all off our minds now, and we'll never refer to it again! It's a closed book, with the 'person's unknown' verdict your jury brought in on Tuesday, Daniel, and the district attorney joining with the city police in saying that Cesare murdered his employer. It can't hurt him now, and it's a good way out. The evening papers said they had caught Tony and Alfio; and they claimed they killed Cesare and Luigi in self-defense, a general quarrel over the stolen jewels. Who will inherit them now?"

"Some distant cousins of Alma O'Malley, who have turned up in Buckeye Center—farm folk, Mitchell says, who won't know what to do with the money," the doctor replied. "It would have reverted to the

State otherwise, for of course Leeds hadn't the slightest claim. Did I tell you, Cornelius, that his second alibi was true? He was too busy bootlegging on that Wednesday night to give a thought to his ex-wife, living or dead. Alfio says his cousin Cesare robbed the wall safe while his employer was dining at Rose Acre. He'd waited all this time to make a bigger haul of those more valuable ones she kept in a vault in town, but made up his mind she'd never bring them out here, and those he got away with were worth quite a large sum. That robbery and the fact of those two men Lutrelle and Kroll both turning up from the past on the same day as the murder complicated the case; and I don't believe that I would ever have discovered the solution. Indirectly, I was responsible. When I told poor Nellie that afternoon in consultation that her days were numbered I didn't only pronounce sentence upon her—I signed Alma D'Almalli's death-warrant!"

"If I had only remembered that conversation with you an hour or two later, Doc, I might have guessed the truth before I did, though I never would have been able to fathom such a motive. Do you think that Mrs. Gresham's years of suffering from her husband's neglect and unfaithfulness could have unhinged her mind?" Peterby asked. "Her love for Rosalie, her fears for her—weren't they magnified?"

"They were not normal, certainly; but I think she was right in her estimate of Rosalie. The girl is impulsive and weak; and the life she was being influenced to choose would have brought only ruin." The doctor

shook his head. "We're condoning a crime, we three, but we cannot judge, and the guilty one is beyond reach of human law."

"I'm not, and I'm accessory after the fact," Miss Parrish remarked with every evidence of complacency. "As to Rosalie, Jim is with her now and has been every minute since they came home from Nellie's funeral this afternoon. Did you know they were going to be married very quietly on Thanksgiving Day? It was Nellie's wish; and they promised just before she breathed her last. How well she knew when she was going; didn't she? The end came just as darkness really fell. Did you notice how Will acted up at the funeral? If I didn't think betting was a sin, I'd be willing to wager something that he marries again himself before spring! But what I want most of all to know, Mr. Peterby, is how you hit on the truth? I've called you several kinds of a fool, but I take it all back. What was that neglected clue?"

"Just part of a sentence spoken in your presence when you came to Rose Acre the morning after the tragedy." Peterby pulled reflectively at his cigar. "Do you remember when Gibbie brought in coffee she said she thought every one would be better for a good, solid breakfast but the cook was so upset that she'd broken the cream-pitcher and burnt the handle of the coffee-pot—and hidden the grapefruit-knife on herself? The doctor described later to me the nature of the wound that had caused Mrs. Leigh's death, the peculiarly curved knife which must have been used; and still I didn't connect the two. But I've eaten enough

grapefruit to know that the pulp must be loosened with some sort of a scoop-like affair. It wasn't until I actually held the knife in my hands that I was certain of the truth. I had to take it to a hardware store in the city and show it, buying another knife just like it, before I recalled Gibbie's words. Your own search for it, Miss Parrish, showed me that the murderer was some one in whom you took a vital interest; and I had thought until then that you were trying to shield some one else."

"Some one else?" She glanced quickly at him. "Who? You can't mean Jim Masters?"

"Yes; for I had a private conversation with him the night of the murder, and he said he'd kill Mrs. Leigh if she succeeded in turning Rosalie against him. But an idea of the truth came to me during my call on you Saturday. Your loyalty, your attempt to turn me from what you feared the investigation might lead to, made me remember your long friendship for Mrs. Gresham; and a glimmering came to me of what her possible motive might have been, granted that she could actually have committed the crime. I left you with the intention of asking her a leading question or two, under the authority of my office; of perhaps accusing her pointblank, but somehow I couldn't. When I reached her house and sat in her presence it seemed that I must be mistaken."

"Yet you were right all the way through, Cornelius," Dr. Oakes observed. "You said from the hour of the autopsy that the real clue, the only one which would help us to arrive at the solution of the

mystery, would be the weapon itself; and it was! We followed a lot of false scents, including the one Kroll carried around with him, but it narrowed down finally to the terrace where the woman came to her death. If I hadn't let myself be wheedled away in other directions by the bizarre aspects of the affair I would have realized it and confined my investigations closer to home; but it's all over now."

"Yes." Peterby's face was very sober. "I'll rusticate till spring drives me out into the garden once more to keep my arteries from hardening; and you'll go on being physician in general to all the bodies and souls in the neighborhood until another murder crops up. Then you'll be coroner again. Leaving aside all personal feelings, it's been mighty interesting this past week, and I don't think I ever knew so much about human nature, good and bad. I don't advocate crime, heaven knows, but if a fresh one should be sprung in the neighborhood I'd like to be your deputy!"

Miss Parrish shuddered.

"Let us hope there never will be another," she exclaimed. "I shouldn't like to commit one where you two amateur sleuths were apt to get on my trail; I had one experience with you last Friday night!"

"If there is need, Cornelius, I promise you I'll call on you and swear you in as my first move." Dr. Oakes' tired face lighted with a smile.

"And," finished Peterby, "the next time there won't be any neglected clue!"

THE END